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No. 28

VOLUME 10

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CONTENTS

● Short Novel

- | | | |
|------------------|---|---|
| WEB OF THE NORNS | Harry Harrison
and Katherine MacLean | 2 |
|------------------|---|---|

● Short Stories

- | | | | |
|----------------------|------|--------------------|-----|
| THE LOCUSTS | | R. Whitfield Young | 59 |
| AN AFFAIR OF GRAVITY | | Edward Macklin | 75 |
| RETURN VISIT | | E. C. Tubb | 89 |
| OUT OF CONTROL | | Kenneth Bulmer | 112 |

● Article

- | | | | |
|--------------------|------|-----------------|-----|
| THE CARP THAT ONCE | | Brian W. Aldiss | 107 |
|--------------------|------|-----------------|-----|

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Both Harry Harrison and Katherine MacLean are well-known American writers of science fiction and fantasy in their own country, but we believe that this is the first time either has appeared in a British magazine. Written originally as a novel, the "Web Of The Norns" has been considerably revised and shortened to suit our particular requirements. It nevertheless is a different type of fantasy story.

WEB OF THE NORNS

By Harry Harrison and Katherine MacLean

The Three Norns, weavers of men's destiny, sit in the dusty hall of eternity with the glittering tapestry of the dimensions around them. Their aged fingers move tirelessly over the strands—twisting, weaving and joining in an infinity of combinations.

Each strand is a life. As they guide the strands they guide the lives. Their voices rise and fall in a constant murmur: they pass the single eye, one to the other, to watch the weaving of this incredible fabric. The voices grow louder, their tones change. Man's destiny is not always smooth.

"No, stop, you cannot bring that world line here."

"It makes the pattern . . ."

"It makes the pattern worse. I will have to make changes in my section."

"Destroyed, I say ; ruined. The work of centuries !"

The voices grow louder, there is a hint of anger in the tones.

"Stop, Grissel, stop. Those changes cannot be made." Her hand flicks across the tapestry in an angry gesture.

There is a ring on the middle finger, the Unicorn Ring. The ring brushes the surface and the Unicorn's horn catches in one of the tiny glittering threads of a human life—and pulls it loose.

"I'll do it my way—give me the eye."

The argument continues. The thread of a man's fate floats unattached in space, unnoticed.

I

"Sorry, mother, it doesn't fit."

"I got it in your size, Granty," Grant's mother said firmly.

"Try it on again and see if it really doesn't fit."

Grant O'Reilly tried it on. He knew very well that it wouldn't fit, and it didn't. The coat was tight across the shoulders and his wrists stuck three inches of cuff out past the sleeves. He had become used to this kind of thing. His mother had bought all his clothes for the wedding, and as usual she had assumed he was younger than he was and got everything too small. This time it was serious. It was Sunday, and they had come a long way out of town for his wedding in this small church where Lucy's aunts and uncles and cousins had been married. There was no chance of buying or renting a morning coat.

He looked at himself in the mirror, trying to see himself in the eyes of Lucy's poised and influential relatives. No, it wouldn't do. Lucy would be dismayed, ashamed of him with his wrists sticking out like a gawky farm boy. He tried to tug the sleeves down. Today of all days, he had to look sophisticated, the way Lucy liked him to be.

His reflection stared back calfishly from the pier glass and made the same plucking gestures at the jacket cuffs. He didn't really like this tall, thin young fellow with the ash-blond hair. The eyebrows were so light that they were almost invisible, giving the face a gentle, saintly expression. When he was away from mirrors he always imagined himself stronger and darker—the fit husband and defender of a lovely woman like Lucy.

Lucy ! A warm glow flushed his face at the thought of her. It was more of a physical thought than a spiritual one and

he felt that it somehow didn't belong in church. He turned from the glass and tried to shrug off the jacket and the thought at the same time.

Herb Collomb slumped in his chair against the far wall and puffed composedly on his ancient pipe. The strength in his solid form gave Grant a feeling of security—the same way it had done all the way through college. They had roomed together and graduated together. It was only fitting that Herb be his best man. Herb grinned around his pipe and Grant was surprised to find himself grinning back.

The vestry window was open and a warm breath of spring air blew in. A bird was singing somewhere outside; the whole world seemed very wonderful to Grant.

Then he looked at the ill-fitting coat he held in his hand and felt the unhappy tension building up inside himself. How could he get a new coat? But it was already too late to do anything; he could hear the warming-up notes of the organ and the shuffling feet of the guests entering the chapel. He muttered a repressed *damn*.

"Don't swear, Grant. I'm sure Lucy would be very hurt if she heard you talk like that. She's from a very good family."

"I'm sorry, mother."

"That's right, dear. I always want to be proud my son is a gentleman."

Herb dropped his pipe and picked it up, looking somewhat red in the face.

Grant tried to smile, and then felt the old, sinking change coming. He tried to stop it. No, not now! Why did it have to be now? Once or twice in his life—by a great effort—he had managed to postpone an attack when its timing was bad.

But he would not be able to hold it back through the entire wedding. Better to get it over with and not spoil the wedding later. All he had to do was to get away from the voices and eyes and be alone for awhile. There was a thin ringing in his ears, coming closer. He stopped fighting it and let it come.

"There's ten minutes yet," he said, hastily over the singing in his ears and the feeling of growing distance between himself and all others. "I'm going to step out in the fresh air a moment."

There was a comfortable old graveyard outside, with slanted stones and long green grass and a gnarled peach tree in full bloom. It was cut off from the outside world and the passage of time by a high stone wall. The side door of the vestry opened to a little flagged path and curved around the building, away from the observing eyes of windows. A private place for a moment at least.

"I have to avoid excitement," Grant thought, letting the door shut behind him. It was too late to avoid it now ; he'd have to take his medicine. Anyone watching would have seen Grant's lips curl back from his teeth in an unhappy grimace that showed irregular canine teeth and changed his angelic appearance to a rather pleasant animal look, like a blonde bird dog. He wandered on, past thought with the pounding in his head, unconsciously seeking a sheltered spot to let go. He found it, a deep right angle in the stone wall where it turned. He blundered off the path and into it, and leaned forward against the wall, propped himself in a corner and waited for the *petite mal*, the time of stone-like unconsciousness.

There was no knowing how much time had passed, but the sudden pressure was gone and the thin ringing in his ears, and he could see and hear and feel again. He leaned there a moment longer, grateful for the cool roughness of the stone against his forehead, thankful that he was not the kind who fell down and thrashed around. He could go and stand quietly in the bathroom with the door shut and not frighten Lucy with it when they were married.

The sickness had deprived him of the games of childhood, hedged him around with the watchful care of his mother. It had taken away his freedom to risk and dare, leaving him only the second-hand adventures of poetry and books. But he was not going to let it take his marriage away from him. His hard-learned ability to feel the fit coming would let him live a normal life and earn money as an architect without his clients ever seeing anything wrong with him. With warning enough, there was always a quiet place where he could go to have an attack.

He turned and looked out across the greenness of the deep grass and the old stone wall with the small sandstone tombstones slanting right and left ; everything was more vivid, as if sight were cleansed.

There was a window above his head and he could hear his mother's voice trickling out, very clear and distant, like a memory. "Granty has fits, you know. If he gets excited, that is. It took me a great deal of trouble to get him exempted from athletics at all his schools without saying what his trouble was. His father had fits, too ; they began after we were married. Such a sweet man. It runs in the family. They're sensitive, you know."

He ignored the unhappy feeling the words gave him and told himself that everything she did was for his good. She would take care of the jacket, too ; she always fixed things so they came out the right way. He stood up to return inside. Then he saw it.

It was long and white and huge. It was like a giant bar or an elephant's tusk stretching across the sky from horizon to horizon. One instant it was as far away as eternity ; the next it was swooping down towards him. He couldn't tell where that awareness came from, but he knew it was true. It was coming directly towards *him*. It was like being on the tracks in front of an express train.

Before he could scream—before the thought that formed the scream was fully born—it was too late. It struck without impact—softly with a sudden sensation of tremendous motion.

The world vanished. In his eye he could see the after-image of the graveyard, the orange of the grass and the red of the sky. The bright colours slowly faded and were replaced by nothing.

That was the only word that described the sensations he felt. At first his mind went out in an expanding spiral of fear, then contracted back to something like sanity. He felt nothing, he heard nothing. What he saw was puzzling until he realised it was no-colour. It was also not black. It was nearest to grey, a grey fog of velvet that pressed in on him from all sides.

With a heart-stopping shock he realised that he wasn't breathing. But his heart couldn't stop, because it wasn't beating. All the functions of his body were dead.

I am dead.

The thought had been scratching at the surface of his mind and now it gibbered its way in. His tightly held thoughts collapsed and his mind screamed out in madness.

There was no measurement of time or duration, so Grant had no idea how long the period lasted. It could have been

years or seconds, but slowly it ebbed away. After the insanity came thoughts, but they helped no more than the madness ; he had no idea where he was nor what had happened.

After the thoughts came boredom, and this lasted for eternity.

His mind became like his body and he hung there in the unchanging grey fog, changeless himself, and waited.

II

"Look now ! Look what you've done. You've pulled one of the threads loose."

"I never—you're the one who did it when you were screaming at me that the pattern was wrong."

"Well the pattern is wrong . . ."

The argument continued and the second sister leaned forward to shout her opinion. The loose thread blew in her face and in anger she shoved it back into the fabric.

She did not weave it back into the pattern but pushed it in at random and returned to the argument.

Abruptly the greyness and silence was smashed by a screaming clamour and Grant found himself falling through air that seemed thick with sound. A filthy board floor came up and smote him, and he lay stunned for a moment amid the clamour of drunken howls, the smash of breaking bottles, the leathery thud and grunt of blows meeting flesh. Yellow light flickered in his eyes and shadows surged above him, snarling.

There was a crunching thud almost directly above him and a man with a short scraggly beard and overlong hair tumbled heavily across Grant's legs. Blood began oozing from his ragged hair, and the shape of his head looked horribly dented.

With a reflex of revulsion, Grant yanked free from beneath the limp hulk and rose to a half crouch. A man had just been killed and dropped on top of him, and no one paid any attention. The crowd and howls had surged away from him and were somewhere else now, although running forms still went past to plunge into it.

Smoke of flickering tapers, the fumes of cooking, the stench of spilled wine and aged food assailed his nostrils and stung his eyes, but he could make out that the room was as big as a barn, with hand-hewn beams close overhead, reflecting back noise and heat and light, and further up, a roof lost in smoky

shadows. The beams seemed to waver in the flickering light with the fury of the human sounds coming from below them.

The screaming crowd had grown until it was close again, but their backs were toward him. Ragged hair hung down below their ears ; they waved staffs, daggers and broken bottles threateningly, shouting at someone in the middle. Filthy shirts of rough brown, like burlap, covered each back, hanging over dirty fur pants.

Grant straightened and found that he was tall enough to see over the heads to the maelstrom in the centre of the mob.

The crowd was attacking a big man who had his back to one of the supporting pillars. As Grant watched, the man lunged with a grunting shout, swung a sweeping blow with a long sword, flung himself back, fended a descending pole from his head with the flat of the sword, smashed back another with a thing like an iron Indian club in his left hand, carried the smash through with a lunge to the head of the staff wielder with a crunch, and lunged back to the pillar again. He moved in jerky stops and starts and retreats of extraordinary energy, slashing and fending, grunting in a half shout with each effort.

The athleticism of it was astonishing, but it was not that which froze Grant. It was the man's costume. The dull brown shine of leather armour like a picture in an encyclopedia, the glint of chain mail, the broad-sword, and the Indian club thing—a mace ? It was something out of pre-medieval history. What was he doing here ? For a moment, his eyes searched for a camera. But this was real blood.

Where was the way out ? Crouching with the wary immobility of a hunted animal, Grant turned his head. Thick benches and tables were scattered around the empty half of the room, tapers flickered in bowls and added smoke to the murky air, overturned tables and spilled bottles littered the floor. Where was the door ? The dimness and smoke confused his eyes, the ghastly sounds rocked in his brain. Where in the name of sanity were there even windows ? What kind of place was this ?

He moved away from the mob sounds, putting a long table between himself and the battle, but a crescendo howl turned him in time to see the end. The fighter in leather armour was temporarily confused ; his sword lodged in a pole where its edge had turned and cut into the wood. He stood trying to

free his sword. A pole, jabbed like a spear, took him in the cheekbone with a blow that canted his head over. His sword pulled free as he was hit, but he had no time to lift it. Jolted back and forth under the thud of heavy staffs finding him at last, hit savagely on all sides at once, the thickset man in barbarian armour staggered a few steps further from the protecting pillar. With a jointless look of unconsciousness and broken bones he pitched headlong in Grant's direction.

Grant broke out of his frozen trance and began to back off, still staring, feeling his way by grip on the splintery boards of the table behind him. Staffs rose and fell over the thing on the floor and daggers flashed, and he was thankful that the triumphant howling drowned out some of its sound. This might be a nightmare, but death in this nightmare was as real as any butchery.

The howl died and men mumbling and cursing and nursing bruises and wounds began to look around. Grant still sidled slowly backward, depending on their attention being held by the dead thing on the floor, while one of the triumphant attackers bent over it, and pried loose the sword from a dead hand. As he raised it toward the ceiling in a triumphant drunken arc, his eyes found Grant and saw him moving. Being seen by one of these creatures of a nightmare was carrying nightmare too far. Grant froze between the instinct to turn and run and the hope of being ignored.

A snaggle-toothed grin split the face of the man who had seen him. "*Kill the blasphemer!*" He put a foot on a bench and leaning over the table separating them and swung at Grant with a clumsy two-handed blow. "*Blood for N'tigh'ta!*"

Grant moved sidewise because he could not go back. The sword sank three inches into the next table behind him, revealing at this close inspection a huge bloody length and a heaviness that was more like an extended axe blade, a terrible weapon that could split a man in half. As the other struggled to free it, Grant leaped around the end of the table and ran, feeling as if he moved on leaden legs. Shouts and howls sounded behind him. He ran toward one end of the room where it was darker. A human figure was dimly visible, and something beyond him that might be a door. A few more strides and, straining his eyes, Grant saw a wide, closed door. He could also see that the man who stood in front of it was raising an axe, waiting for him, grinning.

Grant stopped. He stopped the easy way, by running into a table. There were howls behind him, coming closer, but near him was a ladder, leaning against one of the foot-square rafters that held up the roof. It took half a second to reach it. He pulled himself weakly up the rungs and onto a transverse beam, then turned and kicked the ladder into the faces of the screaming mob below.

For a moment he felt safe. There weren't as many down there as he had thought ; the main crowd seemed to be howling elsewhere in the building after another victim. Nevertheless, four men below him still seemed interested in him. They glared up with their ragged hair in their eyes, and shouted curses about the stain that had to be washed from N'tigh'ta, whatever that was. Those who had staves struck at his legs. Their aim was drunken and missed him, but the grinning lout with the sword was heaving its monstrous length into the air again, and another one had picked up a stool. A staff struck Grant a painful blow on the ankle and he saw he could not stay where he was. He did something he would never have had courage to do an hour earlier. He released his clutch on the vertical pillar and turned and ran along the beam he stood on. It was less than a foot wide and uneven.

Under other circumstances he would have fallen off, but to fall now meant death, so he managed to stay on, although every successful step was a constant astonishment to him. Half-running, Grant staggered the last ten feet and collapsed panting against a central pillar. From this vantage point he had a wide view of the barnlike place.

A small group of the fur-pants were struggling with the ladder that he had kicked down, attempting to right it and follow him. Three blowsy looking women and a fat man were huddling in a gigantic fireplace against the far wall. But below Grant's feet was the centre of the noise.

The whole howling mob that had downed the other soldier, and twice as many besides, seemed to be pressing in around another swordsman with his back toward the pillar Grant was clutching. Massive shoulders and thick arms encased in seemingly inadequate coverings of scarred red leather armour swung in and out with a long sword that seemed from Grant's vantage to be even more huge than the terrible weapon that had missed him a few minutes earlier. A heavy barbed mace in the big swordsman's left hand made abrupt occasional

swings that contacted encroaching staves, daggers or arms with an equal sounding thud and smash, leaving nothing that it touched unbroken.

The athletic energy of the other big soldier had been phenomenal, but as Grant looked down on the glittering, weaving sweep of sword he saw a skill that smoothed away effort and wove a web of steel around the swordsman. The man combined parries and slashes into one unfaltering swing that curved back along its deadly course without ever stopping or slowing when it sliced through wood and flesh and bone, its deadly force not in any separate surge of the arm that swung it, but in the whispering speed of the heavy blade. It was as smooth and dangerous as the singing circle of a propeller, and the mob feared it.

Snarling with drunken fury, they still stayed back from the circle and tried blows at long range, or threw daggers and knives that rang against metal and were smashed aside before reaching the soldier.

Not all of them had been cautious ; red-throated and split-skulled corpses lay within the circle and men dragged themselves apart from the crowd, groaning and nursing broken arms. One was being helped by another to wrap up a bleeding, handless stump.

The soldier sang and shouted as he swung his sword, a wordless chant that fitted the dance of its glittering edge. As Grant watched, he stepped out, grunted with an extra surge and swayed forward in a balanced half step that reached the blood-wet tip of the sword a foot further in its circuit and was rewarded by three separate shrieks from three directions. The encircling mob crowded back, cursing and striking each other in their haste, and resumed formation at a more respectful distance, leaving another of their number on the floor curled up around a half severed arm, trying to staunch the red life that pumped from it, dying and not worth the extra stroke that would kill him.

The big soldier was holding his own, but he could not hold that webwork of steel and speed around him forever. He was panting in his chant. Already the crowd had circled behind the pillar. One slip, one falter, and a concerted rush from all sides would overwhelm him.

Grant found he regretted it. Such skill and delight as the big soldier showed in his bloody work was a kind of art and

deserved life. Then he realised that when the soldier went, it would be his turn. It was only the singing circle of the soldier's blade that cleared space where the crowd could not swarm under his beam and batter him down. When the soldier died, Grant would go, too.

Grant clutched at the smoke-blackened wood as a surge of nausea tore at his bowels. What was he doing in this impossible place? Had he been struck by a car and was this all just a feverish dream?

As if to answer, a hurtling bottle crashed against his chest. The blow and the jagged tear in his vest were real, as well as the ache in his ankle where a staff had struck him. He reached a sick certainty that even if this *were* a dream, it would be safer to treat it as hard, merciless fact. There seemed to be a good chance that his death here would be as final as any he would ever have.

The ladder was finally propped against the further end of the beam and the men below were pushing and scrambling to see who would be first up it. Fur-pants with the sword climbed up three rungs, only to be hit in the back of the neck by fur-pants with the stool. As he dropped off, the one with the stool scrambled up, followed closely by the five or six others. Weaving, but keeping their feet easily, they ran along the beam toward Grant.

The one with the stool stopped at a good range and swung the stool back over his head for a skull-crushing blow. The ones behind were not ready for that sudden stop and pushed into him, pushing him closer, and at the same instant, Grant realised that he needed a weapon. Taking advantage of the stool-man's unbalance and hesitation, Grant leaned forward and gripped a leg of the stool and yanked. His yank had force because he kept a hold on the central pillar with his other arm, but fur-pants with the stool had a strong grip on the other legs, and was too befuddled to let go. He was yanked off his feet. With a hoarse shout of anger, the man dove down into the soldier's private battleground of clear floor below; badly entangled with the stool, he landed and had his throat neatly slit by a casual side sweep of the whispering sword.

The big soldier looked up, thinking he was being attacked from above. His face split in an immense grin as he saw Grant facing a line of attacking men.

"Oho ! A friend." He paused, completing another swing around the circle below that was answered with one pained curse, and shifted his position a little, glancing back up at Grant. "And just in time, too !"

In the natural course of some pattern he was weaving, as though without his effort, the sword extended its range in a backhand curve and licked up over the edge of the beam, cutting the ankles from under the first two men ; they tottered, ankle tendons severed, tripping on their limp dangling feet, and fell into the mob. The next man tried to retreat, but only succeeded in unbalancing the unsteady file behind him. As they began to topple off they added to the confusion below, and for a moment the mob drew back, thinking it was being attacked by enemies from above.

The soldier stuck his blood-encrusted mace into a loop on his belt while he drove the circle further back with savage advances and then made a rush to the pillar, as though to clear away the few lurking behind it. There was only one, who leaped backward and tumbled over a bench. In the shadow behind the pillar, where it would not be immediately clear to the mob what he was doing, the soldier laughed and stuck a free hand up to Grant.

"Come on, mate, give us a lift up and we'll soon be out of here."

It was the first friendly word Grant had heard among what had seemed a million howls of hate and murder, and suddenly everything seemed more sane and matter of fact, like the friendly commonsense tone of the soldier. Rapidly but without hysteria, Grant knelt on the beam, locked his right arm around the vertical pillar, and extended his left down to be grasped. He felt a calloused hand grip his.

As the soldier pulled himself up, Grant thought his arm would be wrenched apart at every joint. He bit down on a scream of pain. Still gripping his sword, the big man hooked its hilt over the beam and pulled himself the rest of the way up. He came up smoothly, but most of his weight had been on Grant's arm, and the man was even bigger and thicker with muscle than he had looked from below. At least three hundred pounds of man and equipment had heaved himself up on the tensile strength of one thin, slightly undernourished arm.

Ignoring a clatter of bottles, daggers and small objects that sailed past, the soldier was sheathing his sword and peering into the darkness at the end of the room. He stepped onto the right-angle beam without a glance at Grant, and began to move toward the rear wall. Grant went after him, rubbing his aching arm, but oddly pleased because this time he walked on a narrow beam without a tremor.

As they walked, the roof slanted down closer until Grant could see a low clerestory with sealed windows facing them; above that the smoke-blackened roof angled up into the shadows. The soldier rapped the wall with his pommel and looked satisfied, as though he had found a way out.

Gesturing to Grant to crowd in close, the soldier pointed to the wall, which was hung with shapes like pairs of full sacks and things that looked like festoons of dried weeds.

There was a rancid foodlike smell in the air and Grant realised that the noxious looking things were probably cured meat and herbs. The soldier unhooked two linked hams and draped them over Grant's shoulders. They were massive, pulling him down with a staggering weight for which he was unprepared, seeing them handled so lightly. Grant found himself over the edge and falling, and was brought back onto the beam by a lightning grip and heave of the soldier.

The man grunted a derogatory remark to himself, and then laughed, braced his hands against an overhead timber and began kicking boards out of the side of the building.

For a moment Grant doubted his eyes; the soldier was husky and big, but even a superman should not put holes in a building with a few kicks. Yet the soldier continued to kick, loosening and dispatching another board. Grant had learned about crooked contractors substituting flimsy workmanship in his studies of architecture. The thunk of the boards under the soldier's kicks was not the sound of seasoned timber. As the second kicked board leaned outward and vanished, Grant decided that the sidewalls had probably been fastened on with old chewing gum or something of equal strength, and dismissed the problem. A deeper darkness showed where the boards had been and icy air and snowflakes swirled in instead of the spring sunshine he had vaguely expected. The big man at the opening hardly hesitated for a deep breath before crouching at the edge and leaping out of sight.

Grant, balancing groggily on the beam, looked at the darkness outside. It was not inviting. His moment of indecision ended as a pole reached up and cracked his shin. To stay would be to condemn himself to a peculiarly undignified and butcherish kind of death at the hands of a particularly bestial mob. Other forms of death were to be preferred. He shuffled to the edge and tottered there.

Clutching his hams, he made a hampered attempt to crouch at the edge and leap outwards as the big swordsman had done. He tried and toppled through into frigid, snow filled darkness.

III

The snow outside had drifted and banked high against the building wall. Grant sank into it and floundered helplessly until his head came above the surface.

He could not remember ever having been so uncomfortable before. His body was bruised and sore, the hams hung like a dead weight around his neck, melted snow was soaking into his clothes, and the air, when he came up and encountered it, was icy and filled with flying particles that stung against his face.

His surroundings were completely invisible, a black wilderness of cold. A shout reached him from somewhere ahead and Grant floundered toward the sound to a place where the drifts were only waist high and the wind cut through his thin wedding suit like an icy lash. A few yards on he found what appeared to be a path where other bodies had floundered before him and lowered the snow a little. He jumped as a hand clutched him out of the darkness.

"Follow me, mate—and don't lose those hams or I'll tear out your skinny throat." The soldier moved off, ploughing a shallow channel in the deep snow, and Grant floundered after him.

His shoes were pointed, black, shiny and expensive—or had been when he had last seen them. He couldn't see them now, but he could feel them. They were fine for dancing or getting married in, but they were worse than useless for walking in the snow. Soaked and soggy, they squished with every step. Grant shoved through the clutching drifts and felt sorry for himself.

He had thought of asking the trudging form ahead to stop and let him rest, but he had the horrible thought miles back

that if he stopped he would freeze to death. This was the only thing that enabled him to put one numbed foot in front of the other. He had followed the swordsman, expecting him momentarily to arrive at a house or some warm place ; it would be impossible that the man was content to plough through endless hellish snow. But he had long ago given up thinking about when they would arrive at the warm place, or where they were going, and just stumbled after the moving man ahead, as if he were warmth itself, always retreating, always out of reach.

The darkness was passing and the sky was brightening—showing the wastes of snow around him. Even light seemed to hurt with the bitter numbness of nerves that were almost frozen.

In the growing light he saw small trees on either side. They thickened until the men were threading in and around large trees in a wood thick enough to stop the biting wind and allow only a thin layer of snow to cover its floor. Grant followed the man in barbarian armour over the clearer ground, his mind awakening and beginning to ask unanswerable questions, until they emerged from the trees into the cold and the drifting deep snow again.

Closing his eyes against the bite of wind, Grant tried to stop sensation and thought. They ploughed across a rutted path that might have been a road under the snow, and then down a slope with trees, the soldier going faster, and Grant keeping up because it was easier to stagger downhill. The wind got behind and hurried him, putting knives of cold into his back.

Down in a hollow ahead, sheltered from the wind, a small campfire flickered. Grant's first realisation that they had reached their journey's end was when a hoarse voice called out . . .

"Hold there ! Who is it ?" There was the quick rasp of a sword being slipped from the scabbard.

"Aker Amen and some hams—make room by the fire, you lazy sons !"

The soldier pushed up to the blaze, with Grant tottering eagerly after him. Before he could reach its beckoning warmth, the man with the sword jumped forward and clutched him by the shirt front.

"Aker, this isn't Begiln ! What happened to him—and who is this wreck with the meat necklace ?"

Aker Amen toasted his wet feet and frowned into the fire. "Bigeln was a fool and now he's dead. I would be too, except that this stranger came along and we managed to get out of that filthy spowl's nest together. Let him be."

The swordsman let go of Grant's coat. Since this was the only thing holding him up, Grant collapsed in a limp heap. One of the hams plopped into the mud next to Aker Amen, who produced a dagger from his belt and calmly sawed himself off a piece of meat. He chewed the tough flesh and ruminated. He must have been thinking of the battle because he made a disgusted noise and shook his dagger at the swordsman.

"Put that sticker away, Grayf, and let me tell what a fool that Bigeln was. We were in this drinking hall finishing three or four small bottles. The townsmen are dirty, ugly and stupid—more animals than men. The only thing they care about is their stinking little god, N'tigh'ta. He's an ugly little monster with a big belly and a hollow head—they put sacrifices and such in this scooped-out top of his head. They have little idols everywhere ; it's about all you can do to avoid stepping on them."

Grant groaned as he turned his other side toward the flame.

"Well, we're sitting there drinking. That stupid Bigeln should have known better—he's been in this place before. But you know what he does ? He's chewing weed, and before I can stop him, he rolls a great gob around on his tongue and lets fly."

Grayf, the other soldier, let his jaw drop with amazement.

"No !"

"Yes !" Aker roared the word out. "He thought the idol was a nice fancy little cuspidor. He spits in it, and those fur-pants' spowls let out a shout you can hear ten miles away. The next second we have our swords out and are fighting the whole damn town. They got Bigeln and I got out."

"But what about *this* ?" Grayf jerked his thumb at Grant's collapsed form. "What are you going to do with him ?"

Aker cut another slice of meat. "Not going to do anything with him. He was just standing around, so I brought him along to carry those hams. I wanted to keep my sword arm free. Fact is, I don't even know who he is." He jabbed a

giant thumb about three inches into Grant's ribs. "Hey—who are you?"

Grant opened one bleary eye and tried to gather together his foggy thoughts.

"M'name's Grant O'Reilly and I'm a student at Columbia. I was just—just standing—when . . ."

He bogged down at the attempt to describe what had happened to him and his head dropped back onto his chest.

A pimple-faced boy of about sixteen, who had been keeping in the background, leaped forward, shouting at the same time.

"You heard him! He said he's a student—student magician, that's what! I'll cut his throat and drink his blood and take his clothes and—" He grabbed a handful of Grant's hair and snapped his head back, starting to draw a battered dagger across Grant's throat.

Aker shifted his weight and kicked the boy into a snowdrift.

"You take orders from me and that's all you do. You do the carrying and the cooking and leave him alone. Even if he is a student, he can fight, which is more than you can do." The boy drew back, sniffing and rubbing his hip, and threw a look of black malevolency at Grant.

Grant ignored him because he was already drifting into sleep.

During the night, the flight and battle with the mob recurred in fragments of dream that wove in with what he had heard Aker Amen say. And slowly, penetrating ever deeper, with a chill like the cold beyond the fire, came the realisation that these men spoke and lived as if their way of life was the only one—as if they had never heard of any other. Wherever his world of money, air-conditioned houses, of warm beds and swift automobiles and police and ambulances to protect him had gone, it was gone so unreachably far that Aker Amen and Grayf and the snarling ones in the tavern had never encountered it, never heard of it. However he had arrived here, he was a long way from home. There would be no easy road back.

Slowly through the night, the reality of memories of civilization and comfort and the hopes of rescue faded until they seemed mere fantasies of a world that had never been.

The boy poured water on the fire, and the hissing and steam woke Grant from his soggy sleep.

It was snowing again.

He felt mauled. His muscles ached terribly and were so stiff he could scarcely move. His back, which faced away from the fire, was numb with cold ; his feet were soaked and his nose was running. He sat huddled beside the smoking ruin of the fire and tried to pull his ragged thoughts together. Perhaps he was in Alaska or some savage corner of Greenland. That was a possibility.

With his arms clasped around his legs and his chin resting on his knees, he was forced to stare at the tattered remains of his dress shoes. They focused his attention, because they were more than shoes. They were symbolic. The shoes were Grant. A well-constructed, civilized product, perfectly in tune with a well-ordered world. Now a period of darkness and a night of madness, and that world was gone. Security and comfort vanished with it. All that remained of the shoes was a torn, bruised cover with a bit of blue flesh peeping through—his flesh. He rubbed his dripping nose on his coat sleeve and snuffled in self pity.

It was still snowing, white flakes falling out of the grey lead sky into a silent world. The only thing he could hear was the soft sibilance of falling snow. Grant sat up suddenly, the little drifts of snow falling from his back.

The significance of the doused fire penetrated. He was alone.

He forgot the soreness and fatigue of his body now—it was a matter of survival again. Slipping in the slushy soup around the fire, he tottered to his feet. The clearing was empty. He screamed at the top of his lungs, his voice cracking with terror.

“Akerrrr . . . ! Aker Amen ! Helloooo ! !”

It was like shouting into a sea of drifting feathers, and produced as much result. He lurched around the clearing and noticed a track leading off through the trees. The footprints were fresh, but the windblown drifts were already beginning to fill them in. Grant followed them ; it was his only chance for survival in this icebound wilderness. Aker would help him—*had* to help him. He realised for the first time how completely incapable he was. Without some help he would be dead by nightfall.

He pushed through the woods, stumbling over concealed obstacles and falling headlong in the drifts. As he came down a slight rise, he found himself on the same road-like track he had crossed on the way in. Three dimly-seen figures were

just starting up the bank on the far side. At his shout, they stopped and he rushed up to Aker, who was breaking trail.

"You can't leave—you can't leave without me ! You've got to take me with you !"

Aker Amen adjusted his sword belt and fixed Grant with a cold, indifferent gaze.

"Why ?"

Grant gaped twice, but couldn't think of what to say. There were no answers to the devastating question. Why should they help him ? He realised instinctively that a plea of "humanity" or "friendship" would be worthless, as well as out of place. This society wasn't built like that. With the speed of desperation, his mind raced to other possibilities. Convenience, help ? He knew that he didn't dare offer fighting assistance ; last night had shown how woefully lacking he was in that important commodity. He could think of no other talents that might interest them. For the first time in his twenty-five years of existence he would have liked to reverse his civilized attributes and have a strong back and a weak mind.

Weak as his back was, though, it might be useful to them.

"I can carry your things, your equipment or whatever . . ."

Grant stopped suddenly as he realised that Aker and Grayf had, besides their weapons, only large leather wallets slung from their belts. His unspoken question was answered by a jerk of Aker's thumb.

Grant had been in such a panic when he passed the boy that he hadn't realised what he was carrying. He saw it now, a gigantic pack, hung with pots, sacks, and bundles and crowned with one of the stolen hams. The weight of this monster load had forced the boy to the ground as soon as the group stopped. He sat on a hummock in the road now, breathing heavily and greeting Grant with a malevolent stare.

That job was taken care of, too.

Aker Amen had turned back to resume the trail, but he stopped suddenly, his head cocked to one side. At the same instant Grant was aware of a distant rumbling, like muffled drums.

"Horses coming ! Into the woods !" Even as he shouted the words, Aker was diving into the underbrush. Grant was too startled to act, but Grayf was galvanised into instant action. Grant was between him and the safety of the trees,

a fact that made little difference to Grayf. He scarcely slowed when his shoulder hit Grant ; then he was among the trees and Grant lay sprawled helplessly in a deep snowdrift.

The boy was still struggling to his feet when the horsewomen came. Grant had just a fleeting glimpse of them—long, flowing blonde hair and gilt breastplates—as they swept down the road. One of them uttered a coarse cry as they passed. She leaned far out of the saddle and made one sweeping stroke with her sword. The boy stumbled and fell to the ground. The ham, loosed by the fall, flew in one direction ; the boy's head bounced in another. A thick stream of blood gushed from the dismembered neck and stained the snow a deep red.

The two soldiers reappeared at the edge of the road and hurled blistering oaths after the horses. Clear, girlish laughter floated back and they cursed the louder. Grant pulled himself from the chill embrace of the drift and tried to brush off most of the snow before it melted.

"You there—Grant O'Reilly ! Still want to come along ? We need a boy to carry our duffle."

Aker and Grayf howled with laughter and pounded each other on the back. Grant couldn't quite see the joke, and considered it to be in the worst taste possible. He found it hard, however, to stifle his own feeling of happiness and relief. The boy's death, untimely though it had been for the lad, might provide Grant's one chance of survival.

He pulled the packstraps from the limp form and tried to ignore the accusing stare of the bodiless head. He would have taken the pack and left, if Aker hadn't reminded him that survival was still the most important factor in this brutal world.

"Might as well take his clothes. Unless you have to wear those things you've got on."

Grant swallowed squeamishness and took the advice, while Aker Amen and Grayf waited, lounging against a tree and making remarks. The falling snow thinned and stopped as Grant stripped the boy's grey body, unpeeling layers of unsewn fur and belts and bands of leather that held the fur in place, and wrappings of filthy cloth which he dropped on the snow after he observed black specks of fleas hopping off.

Aker Amen shifted his weight with an impatient creak of leather. "Make it fast."

Grant could not grasp the intricacies of the boy's wrappings, but one large cowhide was slit in the centre like a poncho, and

when he slid his head through the hole and belted the hide around the waist with a leather strip from which dangled the boy's dagger it was a neat, respectable tunic, and the thickness of the leather shut off the cold blasts of the wind. A sudden itch indicated the leather had other tenants, but just then he did not care.

Hastily, already feeling better, Grant sat down in the snow and ripped the soggy shoes off his blue feet, hissing between his teeth at the needling pangs they gave forth at every touch, and shoved them into the lumbering boots of the boy with a grunt that barely restrained desperate profanity.

The boots were warm and oddly soft inside and crackled when he stood up in them. He realised that they were mukluks, soft leather boots stuffed with hay. The Eskimos used them, he knew ; his feet should be comfortable, though now they felt as if all the imps of hell were applying red hot needles.

Bits and pieces of leather in various odd shapes were stacked beside the corpse in the snow. Grant looked them over uncertainly, draped one piece around his neck like a scarf and took a piece that was wide in the middle and thin on the ends and tied it over his head and under his chin. Judging by Aker's and Grayf's sudden roar of laughter, that was not the use for which the item was intended, but it kept the wind from his ears. Aker straightened, ready to go, and Grant abandoned the rest of the inexplicable odds and ends of leather and left them scattered beside the naked, headless body as he went to pick up the pack.

It was too heavy to get off the ground, but its shoulder straps stood out stiffly, as if suggesting a solution. He half knelt and slipped his arms through and then pulled himself hand over hand up a sapling until he was almost upright and had his legs under him enough to take his weight.

It was a neat bit of commonplace practical thinking which he would not have been capable of a freezing half hour ago. He was still cold, but he could move and think ; his mind was no longer congealed with cold and already the exertion was beginning to warm him. He looked around for approval, but Aker and Grayf had vanished into the silent, snow-filled wood, leaving a double trail of footprints.

Stumbling under the unwieldy load, but moving ahead steadily, he followed the trail of the footprints, occasionally hearing the murmur of a voice ahead.

IV

He was secure, with a place and a job and protectors. As he trudged, the exertion warmed him. His feet stopped flaming with thawing pains and began to feel like feet again. Without the counter-irritant of other aches for the first time, his attention was drawn to a hollow sensation in his stomach and he realised that he was hungry. As he walked he reached back with the dagger and hacked off slices of ham and stuffed them between his teeth. It was delicious in his salivating mouth ; and once down, it glowed in his stomach, sending messages of nourishment and cheer through his blood. He ate enormously, although in a less hungry state he would have found the ham inedible. This time he had skipped three meals and had undergone more exertion than ever in any comparable period of his life. The badly smoked ham tasted like the best food he had ever eaten.

He was puzzled. By all that he knew about himself and his state of health, he should be feeling sick, or be dead, not feeling this unexpected exhilarated pleasure at the simple fact of eating ; nor should he be enjoying the dazzling whiteness of snow in spite of the cumbersome weight of the pack he lugged. He had been told that he was weakly, that he should avoid exertion and excitement, yet he had the thought that no one who was weak could have picked up the monstrous pack at all. He had lifted it because he had to carry it or die, and every step was a new and conscious effort, but the strain was probably the effort to force lazy surprised muscles to do the job they had been intended to do, and the pangs were pangs of disuse.

Why had he ever believed he was an invalid ?

Because his mother had told him, and because he had those fits of immobility.

Slipping and catching at bushes, he followed the trail of footprints as they wandered down an embankment and struck left along a dry creek bed at the bottom.

The floor of the creek bed was a nightmare for a novice woodsman. There were hidden tree roots to catch his feet and snow-laden branches to catch at his face and dump their burden of snow on his head. As he went on, he reviewed the passages in Cooper where the hunter went silently and skillfully through the forest, and remembered how he had envied and wished he could do it too. If he had followed his inclina-

tions, he might have been as soft footed as an Indian, as magnificently muscled as Aker Amen, not a clumsy beginner.

His smooth-soled mukluks slipped on a downslope in the stream bed and he sprawled ignominiously on his back, and had to scramble for holds to pull himself upright, losing many minutes before he could hurry on. Grant O'Reilly took the falls and bruises without the concern that had always made him fear mortal damage to his health—a bitter anger against his unused, pampered body kept him driving on. He would overtake Aker Amen and Grayf and show them he was no laggard.

But they remained elusive, although sometimes he heard their voices ahead. Hours passed, and as he went on, he remembered the coddling care his mother had given him, her warnings to avoid excitement, to stay away from the other children. Why had he believed her?

Because of the fits, the moments of dizziness and immobility. Yet now, when his muscles ran with liquid flame, when he had never exerted himself so much for so long in his life, he was not sick. Yesterday he had been closer to death and more legitimately frightened than at any time in his life, and yet he had had no fits and had not been sick. As a matter of fact, he felt more wide awake and his senses were sharper now than at any time he could remember. Then what had given him fits and dizziness, if not this kind of thing?

Half skidding, half sliding down another short drop in the stream bed, Grant braced his hand against the bank and fell sidewise as his hand went through into a snow covered bush which had looked like solid earth. For a moment, in the sudden sheltering dark, he lay limp and thought of something that might be an answer. Excitement without any exertion was notoriously unhealthy, a source of ulcers to business men. And a child needed activity more desperately than an adult. Inaction, then, had made him sick. His mother's coddling had made him sick!

Anger drove him, and he clawed his way out of the bush and staggered out into the bright snowy day to follow the footprints of the eternally elusive Aker and Grayf, grinding his teeth. He would show his mother, he would be a savage, like these savages, and not the puny, effete fool she had tried to make of him.

The soldiers held him in too much contempt to walk with him, he thought bitterly. They could tell he was following

anyhow ; probably the thumps and crashes of his blundering could be heard for miles. They did not know he had been deprived of his birthright, that he could have been as good a man as either of them, if he had been given a chance.

The sound of a branch cracking ahead and a murmur of voices encouraged him to totter forward at a more rapid rate. If only he could catch up, he might be able to ask them to stop for a short rest. He scrambled up a short embankment from the dry stream that they had been following and found the broken branch when he reached for the last hand hold. There was no one there when he reached the top—only footprints which circled as if in doubt or discussion and then started off in a line again.

Grant followed, and the woods thinned and the ground grew more level. He could go faster now without tripping. He found himself stumbling across a large clearing and looked up from the trail of footprints just in time to see the two soldiers disappearing into the forest on the far side. He tried to make a cheerful shout, but the most noise he could muster was a faint croak.

But his voice was heard. He was answered from the woods behind his back by a rumbling cough that raised the short hairs on the nape of his neck !

There was terror in the sound, and a bestial strength that made him sick at heart. No animal he knew could make that sound and he had no desire to get better acquainted. He moved across the clearing as fast as he could. There was a crashing from the thicket he had left. His pace increased.

Halfway across the clearing he tried to look over his shoulder—and tripped. He sprawled in the snow. He could summon no strength to rise, even when the beast broke out of the woods.

At his first glance, it reminded him of a black kangaroo, but outside of the powerful rear legs there was little resemblance. The front legs were short and thick, ending in curved, white talons. The beast's head was long and wolfish, the ears tufted like a lynx's, and very mobile. They twitched in all directions until they suddenly centred on Grant. The animal coughed again and then showed double rows of pointed teeth and charged.

Grant struggled to free his dagger as the beast bounded across the snow. He pulled it free of his belt but had no idea

of how to use it on a brute each of whose paws held claws as long as his blade.

The black-furred legs sank into the snow six feet from where he lay. They contracted for a last leap. Grant could see the tiny green eyes, the saliva that speckled the black fur beneath the teeth.

There was a sudden *thunk*, the clean sound of an axe biting deep into a tree, and a feathered shaft appeared between the eyes. The legs jerked once and the great body flopped sideways, the black hulk half sinking into the white snow.

Grant looked dazedly at the lustreless eyes with the red arrow projecting between them. He looked quickly around. The forest was as quiet and apparently as empty of life as it had been all day. He shook once—and then again in an uncontrollable spasm. In the brief respite from walking, exhaustion had finally caught up with him and the delayed terror of death reached through his tired mind a second later. The woods were full of unseen black monstrosities and arrows of secret death.

He fought to his feet, struggling against the weight of the pack as if it were heavy paws on his shoulders and fled, screaming and staggering headlong through the forest. He would have run until he crashed into a tree if a strong arm had not stopped him.

Grant tried to struggle from the clutch, howling with terror, and at last freed himself of the pack. He did not feel the blow across his face—but he was sitting on the ground, the red mist clearing from before his eyes.

Then he saw that Aker Amen stood over him, and knew that he was safe. His body, racked by over-exhaustion, shook uncontrollably.

Aker Amen glowered down, and gouged Grant's buttocks with a not-too-gentle toe. "Now what's all the noise about? You hollered enough to be heard from here to the Crying Mountains."

"An animal," Grant stammered between deep gasps for breath. "Strange animal, black, big and black, with claws and long hind legs. It was going to—"

The description obviously meant something to Aker. He half drew his sword and peered into the thickets under the trees. "Damn the miserable luck! We've got a Berl-Cat on our trail. He must be right behind you."

Grant went white again and hastened to dismiss the idea. "No, the arrow took care of him, a perfect shot. But I couldn't see where it came from. That was the trouble." He was leaning on the ground, relaxing and letting his spine uncurl from the punishment of the pack load, quite sure that Aker Amen was woodsman enough to prevent any mysteries from creeping up on them. He was resting his eyes on Aker Amen's leather-wrapped feet as he talked, and he saw them suddenly stiffen motionless. It was an odd impression to get from feet.

Aker's voice reached his ears in a whisper. "What colour was the arrow?"

"Red."

Grant looked up and saw sweat suddenly shining on the big soldier's forehead.

With a very slow, steady motion, his arms trembling with a barely perceptible tremor, Aker Amen put his left hand to his sword hilt and finished drawing it from its sheath.

"We have come in peace and we go in peace!" His voice was loud and falsely calm, and he seemed to be addressing the trees of the forest. "We love the holy men of Al'kahar, and desire to share the test of power."

Holding his sword dangling lightly from his fingertips, Aker pushed it carefully through the snow into the ground until it stood unsupported. He stepped away from it with a courteous gesture and hissed at Grant between his teeth. "Get up, you outland idiot! Slowly. Look *polite* and put your dagger in the snow."

Following instructions occupied Grant's attention. When he looked up, he saw the men coming out from between the trees . . .

V

They were coming from all directions. Men in black robes, their heads covered by cowls. Each man had a long red bow across his back and a handful of crimson arrows in his waistband. They crossed the snow as silently as falling leaves.

Their faces were the faces of the dead, grey and bloodless, with eyes that glimmered in the dark caverns of their eye-sockets.

Grant tried to make out the expression in the eyes but if there had ever been a soul behind those eyes, that soul had

died and rotted and dried up many years ago. It was like trying to look into the expression of a mummy.

Aker Amen's steady voice was like unexpected sanity in a bad dream. "I will give myself to the test of arm, and my companion will give himself to the test of . . ." He delayed and swept Grant with a contemptuous glance and muttered, "What in hell can you do? Sword, dagger, mace, bow . . .?"

Grant recalled that he had one talent which might be of value in this primitive place. He had taken archery, classified as a low exertion sport, for his required gymnasium credits in college. He heard his own voice thin and hesitant.

"I think I could use one of those bows, if . . ."

Aker spoke loudly. "My companion will give himself to the test of eye. Who will test me?"

There was still no reply, but a black-robed figure, taller than the others, stepped forward and divested himself of arrows and bows. He pushed his hood back, revealing an expressionless head, as hairless, smooth and unhuman as a statue's head, with eyes no more alive than stone eyes.

Watching the man, Aker stripped off his weapons and armour and dropped them in the snow, leaving himself lightly clad and younger and more supple in proportions of shoulders to belly than Grant would have thought. Grant was again suddenly shamed with the realisation that Aker was almost as young as he, for all his manly skills. The soldier stretched his muscles and arched his fingers, scanning his opponent, and estimating.

The others did not speak, even to murmur among themselves. The trees held the hush of snowfilled woods, and somewhere there was the susurrant of an overlaid fir branch bending and releasing its white burden to the snow covered ground.

The two men leaned forward imperceptibly; then like an uncoiling snake, in a blur of speed, the tall one in the dark cloak leaped forward with his spread fingers jabbing to Aker's face. With equal speed, Aker slapped the hand aside before it reached him, as if slapping aside an insect, and countered with an underhand swing of a balled fist. But the tall one's jab had been a feint and it was matched by a simultaneous low jab from the other hand. It might have killed a lesser man. Aker reacted with a startled grunt, and his first blow wavered off centre, glanced off the other's ribs and spun the tall one away from him. The exchange of blows and jabs

was short and fierce ; it ended when the other hooked one of Aker's legs from beneath him. As Aker fell, he grabbed the other to him like a cat, twisted in midair and landed heavily with his opponent beneath him.

The robed stranger struggled to his feet with Aker on his back. They fell again, their feet kicked up streamers of snow, and again the tall one's tendoned hands crept over Aker's shoulders to seek his eyes. Aker buried his face against the other's back, muffling his eyes in the folds of the hood, and shifted position subtly. The muscles of his arms sprang up in clear relief and his tunic began to split across the shoulders.

For a moment they lay still, locked in ultimate effort, both of them so covered with snow as to be white sculpted marble ; then a sudden small noise shot the length of the clearing, the sound of a dry branch cracking. Breathing heavily Aker climbed to his feet and left his opponent lying limp with a broken spine.

Grant glanced around apprehensively, but the watchers remained impassive, without grief or vengeance for their dead companion.

Abruptly a bow and six arrows were shoved into Grant's hand. He looked at them stupidly until he heard Aker Amen's fierce whisper. "Shoot, you fool ! Hit some small target. Their man will have to match the shot."

With a heavy pounding in his heart, Grant set five of the arrows into his belt and nocked one onto his bowstring. The bow was heavier than the ones he was used to, and had a different feel. He would have liked to have had a few trial shots first, but knew that would be impossible. His hands were still trembling, but he hoped they would steady on the pull. Glancing around the clearing he saw a scar on a tall, oaklike tree. It was white against the dark trunk and should make an easy mark.

The bow had a very heavy pull. With great labour Grant drew the arrow back its full length and let fly. He almost gasped with horror as he saw it was a full six feet wide of the mark.

The arrow continued, arched downward, and struck a tree ten yards further on, impaling a sucker and pinning its single leaf to the bark. If that had been his mark, he would have considered it a good shot at an unusual distance.

The robed men had turned to follow the arrow's flight, and had not seen him wince at the miss. He tried to act smugly confident, in spite of the scowl and the fierce set of Aker's eyebrows. The soldier had been watching and was aware of Grant's ineptitude.

One of the dark figures moved next to Grant and pushed back his cowl. His hair had been shaved off and the pale skin was covered with small sores, every one with a tiny cut in the centre. The sores were evenly spaced and, Grant realised with a shudder, undoubtedly self-inflicted.

The man wet his finger, tested wind direction, settled his feet, raised his bow, measured the distance and the mark a moment—then drew the string and released it in a single motion. The arrow was a scarlet blur against the leaden sky. It arched upward and fell straight, hitting Grant's arrow and splitting a long sliver from it.

"Robin Hood," Grant tried to mutter sneeringly, but it did not succeed. Fear still clutched at his guts. Now the other would shoot first, and Grant follow, and he had very little faith in his ability to best a marksman as sure and steady as the man with the sores.

His opponent nocked another arrow to the string and stood relaxed as one of the robed men poked into a coppice of small bushes.

The arrows were slid from Grant's belt as he watched. Startled, he glanced aside to see Aker standing close, peering at the arrows with his head bent ostentatiously.

"I think you were given crooked arrows—let me look at them." He stooped more closely over the arrows and Grant had a momentary glimpse of a bright flash in his hand. Aker had one of the arrows hidden behind the others and was rubbing it with something that flashed. He whispered now, but Grant could catch the words.

*"Sharp the point and keen the eye,
Hit the mark when off you fly."*

He straightened up and handed the arrow to Grant.

"Here, this one looks to be the best."

When Grant examined the arrow, he started to smile. In his own crude way the barbarian was trying to help. Aker had scratched a little eye on the flat metal point of the arrow-head and muttered a spell over it! He had even daubed a

little colour onto it. Grant stared at the little green eye and it stared back.

Then it blinked slowly and looked away.

Grant jerked and almost dropped the arrow. He became aware, with growing horror, that the wood shaft was writhing gently in his hand. The point of the arrow was twitching back and forth. It reminded him of only one thing, a dog's nose twitching after a scent.

There was a swift whirring from the woods and Grant looked up, glad of the diversion. The beater had disturbed a covey of fat little birds and they flew up in a dun-coloured cloud. Grant's opponent drew and shot with smooth speed, the red shaft hissing up. One of the birds was caught fair in the middle and tumbled down, impaled on the arrow. The men all looked to Grant.

He seemed to be watching himself also. He had the strange arrow nocked on the string and drawn back with no conscious effort. He never had the slightest chance to aim before his fingers relaxed and the arrow plunged upwards.

It hit one bird and, curving slightly, penetrated another bird. The weight of the two hapless flyers dragged at it and the arrow turned a slight arc and fell back towards earth.

The next thing was a little too grandstand, Grant felt, too much like showing off. The arrow turned obviously and impaled a squirrel to the branch it had been scampering along. Grant rubbed his eyes to clear away what he was sure was a fault of vision. When he looked back, the scarlet arrow was still stuck in the branch with its load of three tiny bodies. He had won the test of power by a score of three to one.

When the whirr of the flushed birds had faded away in the shadows under the trees, silence returned to the forest. The silence lasted an instant and was replaced by a sound.

The cry of a wounded cat, the throbbing wail of a coyote, the trumpet of a bull elephant—these were the inhuman echoes of the sound, but there was more ; the tone of sobbing, weeping, cursing, all the emotion-torn cries of sick mankind.

Heads back and mouths stretched wide as animals, the black-robed men wailed. Grant sank to his knees before it and covered his eyes against the rain of arrows he felt sure was to follow.

The wail throbbed and sank. He dropped his cowardly arm. A few bushes shook and were still. The clearing was

empty. The dead man had been carried away. The heavy beating of his heart and the bow and arrows tightly clutched in his white-knuckled hands were the only signs of the strangers' visit.

Aker Amen had also felt the terror of that last wail. He pulled his sword from the snow, and cursed eloquently as he wiped the blade dry. Grant walked to where he had dropped his pack and collapsed against it. Without interrupting his stream of invective, Aker aimed it at Grant.

"You misbegotten, worm-fingered, stew-brained, rock-headed civilian . . . if you hadn't made all that fuss with the Berl-Cat those Al'kahar maniacs might never have heard us. Not only that, but with your lousy shooting I had to use up that good *climean* spell! Urrrgh . . ." The vituperation tapered off into a growl of anger as he buckled on his armour. As soon as all his equipment was secured, he started to leave, but turned to glare at Grant tugging tiredly and half heartedly at the pack. "Rouse up and lean into that pack—we have to be out of these woods by sunset."

He did not say why, but Grant needed no urging. He had his fill of the things that lurked in this forest.

He lifted the hand clutching the bow and arrow, nodding questioningly at the encircling forest.

"Keep 'em," Aker growled. "You're supposed to have won them." He started moving again.

With a certain confidence at having a weapon at last, Grant unstrung the bow and shoved it and the arrows into a strap of the pack and shrugged the giant burden onto his shoulders. By the time Aker reached the edge of the clearing, Grant was a pace behind, settling the burden into position as he went.

Suddenly he was aware that Grayf was missing, and had been missing through the entire affair. Between shifts of the pack he wheezed, "Where's Grayf?"

"We were down the trail when I heard your noise. I came back. He should have gone ahead and waited." And Aker Amen added like a grim prayer, "If he went far enough away he'll be out of the way of *them*."

Five minutes later a turn of the trail gave them the answer. Grayf lay there face down, his arms extended and his fingers hooked into the ground. He was like a monstrous pincushion full of monstrous red pins. From his back and legs there projected at least two dozen arrows.

"The fool must have tried to run." Aker passed the body in a wide circle, dragging Grant after him. "Don't go near him, or you'll look the same. The dead are sacred to the Al'kahar." He added in a fierce rumble, "That's what they eat."

As soon as they were out of sight of the riddled corpse Grant leaned against a tree and tried to lose his breakfast.

VI

They continued the next hours at a slower pace. Aker grumbled and prodded Grant on with word and toe, but eventually gave up and adapted his long stride to that of the slower man, frequently ranging ahead silently to scout the trail.

At dusk they came to the end of the forest. The trees ended abruptly at the edge, a vertical escarpment, a granite wall with a thread of trail meandering down the face of it, widening out once into a green tree-grown shelf, then narrowing again. At the foot was a pleasant valley, with fields and meadows, and far away a smudge of smoke rising from some kind of habitation.

As they went down the path they left the forest of the "holy men" of Al'kahar.

The path was less difficult than it had looked from above; it had been hand carved many ages ago, to judge from the weathering, but it was still usable and steps had been hacked out for the worst descents. The brisk wind swept the path free of snow. Grant concentrated on balancing his pack and staying away from the sheer drop on his left.

There was a shallow grotto where the trail levelled out halfway down, and the smoke-blackened wall and lumps of charcoal under the snow showed that travellers had stopped here before. As Grant groaned out of his pack, Aker ranged ahead onto the shelf with its overgrowth and the sound of wood being hacked rang back. The long sword had more than one use.

Now that they had stopped, Grant's hard-earned warmth seeped away. He hopped from one foot to another and blew on his numbed fingers.

Aker was back after a time with a load of dead branches. He stamped a clear spot at the base of the stone wall, where the stones before it would cut off the light of the fire, and

made a conical pile of broken sections of tree limb. Then he shredded a mound of splinters under them. From the depths of his wallet he dragged out a small metal box. Grant tried to guess what it contained—a fire bow, or perhaps flint and steel. He was taken aback when Aker shook a little orange lizard out onto his hand. The lizard, sluggish from the cold, slowly drew the nictitating membrane from one eye. Obviously unhappy at the frigid world, it closed the membrane and tried to curl up. Aker stirred it to life with a blunt finger and proffered a few splinters picked from the freshly cut wood. This unlikely food seemed to please the little reptile; its eyes flew open and it gulped the splinters down. It chewed voraciously when Aker produced some larger splinters about the size of toothpicks.

Grant was annoyed and cold. He couldn't see the connection between playing with the pet and starting the much needed fire. The lizard, finished with his dinner, began to curl up again and go back to sleep. Aker brought it close to the mound of splinters and squeezed its tail. The lizard gave him a protesting roll of its eyes and belched a small cloud of flame. Aker popped it back into its box and blew on the smouldering kindling.

Grant felt his mouth hanging open stupidly. In fairy tales he remembered mention of a creature something like this. The mythical lizard that lived on flame. "A salamander!" he murmured aloud.

"Yeah," Aker mumbled between blasts at the fire. "They come in real handy."

The snow had stopped and the wind had fallen at sunset. The fire roared and sizzled and threw back a warm glow from the rock wall. Grant's stomach ground contentedly. He pulled a piece of gristle from between his teeth with a grimy forefinger, surprised he could actually be feeling so well. His body was exhausted, but he enjoyed the pleasure of relaxation after continued exertion. He took a long drag of sour wine from the musty animal-skin container.

He had the salamander box open and teased the little animal with a twig. The indignant lizard blew out a little cloud of red flame, but he jerked his fingers away in time. He fed it some tender splinters to soothe its ruffled feelings. It chewed the wood contentedly and let a little trickle of smoke out of its nostrils.

The tiny lizard symbolized all his troubles. By the laws of reality it couldn't exist. Neither could these strange people with their impossible customs, nor the Berl-Cat, nor the spell that Aker had used on the arrow. Either he was insane and this world was all a part of his tortured mind ; or, if he were sane, he had been transported here from his own world in some unthinkable manner. Wherever *here* was.

"Aker, what country is this?"

"Ter-Klosskrass, Independent Free State of the Tyrant Helbida, Na'tunland. What's the matter, you lost or something?"

"Something." Grant went back to tugging at the gristle between his teeth. The names meant nothing to him. *The names*—they weren't English, yet Aker spoke perfect English. Well, maybe not perfect—but crude English. This *must* be the key to the whole mess.

"Aker, how is it that you speak perfect Xtylporf . . . I mean Hiiopmert . . ." Grant stopped and rubbed the sudden perspiration from his forehead. Aker looked up from his sword-sharpening operation, slightly startled.

"How come I speak *what*?"

Grant knew what he wanted to say ; the concept was perfectly clear. The English language, tongue of our fathers, Shakespeare, literature courses at Columbia. The English language. He'd say it slowly this time . . . ENGLISH !

"UZQINNP !"

"You better give me the wine skin. I think you need some sleep."

"No, no. Aker, you must listen ! Haven't you ever heard of . . . my country ? The capital city is Rtyydbx, I live in . . ." Grant didn't say it, he didn't want to hear it. He knew he would say something horrible that didn't sound in the slightest like New York. He could visualize the ideas so clearly, but he didn't have the words to express himself.

Was it amnesia ? Or was it, the thought struck him suddenly, that he was no longer speaking English ?

"What language are we speaking?"

"Why, High Na'tunlish of course. Are you stupid—or trying to kid me that you don't know the name of your own language ? I can tell you were born here—no accent like me." He gave his chest a thumping blow. "I'm pure Inin tribesman. Slave traders stole me when I was a boy. I killed them later and became a Free Soldier. That's when I first learned Na'tunlish, so I still got an accent. Not like you."

Grant O'Reilly knew he had not been born here. He was sure now that *here* was not even his own world. This must be another world altogether, separate from his own in time and space. He wasn't sure about the details—it had been a long time since he had read H. P. Lovecraft—but this theory seemed the most tenable.

It also explained the language difficulties—or lack of difficulty. He spoke the language of this world, or this part of the world. Sort of like turning a radio to a different station. Same tubes and parts, but a different frequency going in, so different words came out. It was as if he had been tuned out of his own world into this one. The words for *English* and *New York* did not exist here ; only their abstract concepts existed in his brain. It was all very confusing.

The wine and the warmth of the fire were making his head heavy. He pulled what looked like a moth-eaten bearskin rug out of the pack and wrapped it around himself. There was another question he wanted to ask. He raised his head and opened his eyes.

“Aker, who were those men in the forest?”

The soldier growled deep in his throat like a big cat and spat into the fire. “Al'kahar ghouls ! They're the curse of these filthy woods. They *test* all the travellers they can lay their hands on and eat all the ones who fail the test. Something to do with their religion.” He spat again, as if to rid his mouth of an unpleasant taste. “There are more of them in the valley, but we'll be out of their territory in the morning.”

By heroic effort of will, Grant kept himself awake long enough to arrange the bearskin comfortably so that only his nose was sticking out ; then, muffled and warm, he fell into dreamless sleep.

VII

In the morning it was raining. Rain dripped steadily from the mouth of the shallow cave, making long soggy looking icicles that fell off with a crash, leaving the dripping rock bare for the formation of more icicles.

The fire had gone out and the warmth long departed from the rock. The damp reached up from the sodden ground through the worn animal skin that covered Grant and drew the warmth from his body. He pried open gummy eyes and stared at the dawn sky, grey and dripping. He tried to go

back to sleep, but Aker must have heard his movements. A prehensil toe reached out and gouged him in the most sensitive part of his chilled anatomy.

"Get up and start the fire." The voice was muffled, but the meaning was clear. Grant groaned as he hauled his stiff form out of the covers.

The salamander burnt his finger instead of lighting the fire, and he pinched its tail in retaliation. He found a small log, back in a crevice of the cave, and dropped it on his toe and cursed with a growing fluency for at least ten minutes. In spite of this the fire was finally started, and Aker Amen pulled himself next to it and heated up a slab of ham. Grant followed suit, then turned back into his blanket and shivered with comfort, glad that it was raining. There was no going out into the icy rain and Grant wondered, if there had been no rain, *could he have picked up the pack and continued?* He answered himself. *No!*

After breakfast, Aker hummed a war song as he cleaned the matted blood and hair from the spikes of his mace, and told a few reminiscent tales of the skulls the mace had crushed. The rain continued, so he went on with each of his weapons and pieces of armour in turn, telling the stories they reminded him of as he cleaned them. The life of a free soldier was close to the life of a bandit, Grant decided as he listened. It was a carefree sort of telling, but incredibly villainous by civilized standards.

He crawled closer to the fire and wrapped himself more tightly in the blanket. Every joint creaked with the motion, and though he was almost as hot as a toasting ham slab, he continued shivering in spasms.

"You sick?" Aker eyed him sharply.

Grant came out with an excusing lie he had thought of to explain his faults, a lie that he considered more than half true. "No, just out of condition. Weak. I was . . . a prisoner a long time and I've got soft." He paused, ashamed but pleased by the respectful attention visible in Aker Amen's face, then added with a burst of worried truth, "I can't see why I keep shivering. I'm not cold."

"Stiffening up," Aker said casually. "If you don't keep moving around you'll be as stiff as a timber brace by morning." He chuckled, and reached a long arm for a branch from the

depleted fire stack. "When you come back from collecting firewood, we'll have a little sword practice."

With every muscle creaking in protest like a rusting puppet, Grant dragged himself out of his blanket to look for firewood in the cold rain. When he came back, drenched and shivering, Aker greeted him with a blow of a light stick he had fashioned from a branch, and handed Grant another to defend himself with. Aker amused himself by swinging slow motion blows at Grant and watching him scramble clumsily to parry or duck.

Thus the day passed, and it was probably the rain that gave Grant a chance to live and survive, for it rained the next day, too, and in the alternate drowsing by the fire and being prodded awake to seek firewood, in listening open-mouthed to Aker Amen's good-natured tales of thievery, rapine, loot and death, he gradually recovered from the exhaustion and cold-shock of the two days before. The shudders stopped, the weakness and stiffness passed and he ate more ravenously than ever in his memory, the meat going to fill some insatiable hollowness within.

Even as early as the second day, the thin muscles over his big-boned frame had begun to thicken, responding eagerly to the strains that, after a delay of years, had come to them as a cue for growth.

Grant did not appreciate the process ; he only wanted to sleep and eat ; and yet he had to busy himself collecting firewood. He picked up numerous small bruises around head and throat to the tune of Aker Amen's roaring laughter, until he learned to fend off the unexpected blows from the light stick in Aker Amen's hand. He was learning the elemental skills of handling a broadsword.

The muscles of his wrist and arm and shoulder were alerted by this unaccustomed stress and put in their share of call for more nourishment.

At the end of the second evening, Grant and Aker finished the remains of the second ham, and, for a tidbit, ate a squirrel which Grant had put an arrow through in the afternoon. The rain stopped, only the sound of dripping and running water was heard, and the air began to chill.

"Tomorrow we move," growled Aker, and put his sword carefully beside him as he lay down to sleep for with the rain stopped, the predators of the night would be abroad again.

"Where are we going?" Grant's question was muffled by the warm bearskin.

The other man had rolled up next to the fire. He raised his head for an instant, light from the fire glinting from his eyes. "We're going to a war of course, what else? It's going to be good. Wine and blood. Kill and be killed. Good, huh?"

The philosophy of these barbarians could not have been better expressed. Grant roused himself just long enough to answer, with a wry glimmer of irony. "Good, sure . . . that's the only way to live—die." He sank back into a dreamless sleep.

The fire crackled and died. The only sound was the dry rustling of the dead leaves in the trees. The clouds blew away and the stars pierced the cold winter sky, sharp and diamond-like.

The next morning was clear and cold. Grant got up first without any prodding and, shivering, broke the stacked firewood free from the iced ground, and made a small fire. Aker sat up and began humming a battle chant as he buckled on his armour and hung his weapons at his belt.

The sight of the wicked instruments plus the memory of the past four days of bloodshed tended to make Grant thoughtful as he stowed away the contents of the giant pack. The idea of putting on that pack again merely to do murder or be murdered hardly seemed worth the struggle. If he were separated from Aker Amen he would not have to carry all that baggage.

The thought came to him with a twinge, for he liked the big soldier, and had a hunch the soldier liked him—that the rough treatment he was getting, by the standards of these people, was an extreme of good natured protection.

The big soldier finished stowing away his deadly arsenal and kicked the fire down into the snow. "Let's go."

Grant stood up beside the pack and cleared his throat. "Er . . . Aker . . . I've decided to try some other way of life . . . I mean . . . I'm not so good as a fighter . . . You don't need me along."

His big decision made no observable difference to Aker. The soldier hooked a giant hand through one of the pack-straps and lightly swung it across his shoulder.

"Fine by me, only watch out for Berl-Cats. And Holy Men. The woods are full of them. And if you get clear of the woods, don't go near the peasants. They don't like strangers. If they catch a stranger they stick a big sharp pole

through his bottom, and stand him out in the fields to dry out for a scarecrow."

The last words were a little indistinct as Aker was trudging off rapidly down the trail. Grant, who always had a pictorial mind, quickly followed.

Aker turned at his hail and dropped the pack on the ground, then went on without slowing his pace. With an inward groan, Grant slipped the straps into the well-worn grooves on his shoulders, and found with surprise that the burden was not nearly as heavy as he had expected. Perhaps because of the peculiarly vivid alternative Aker Amen's remark had conjured up, but more likely because the ham was now eaten and gone. Grant thought he saw a tilt to the back of Aker's head which meant a big grin was on the front of it.

The trail wound out of the trees to the edge of the cliff again and steepened, going down its face toward the trees of the valley.

At the last turning, Aker suddenly became wary. "This place stinks like an ambush, I'll see what's below."

With Grant standing back and covering him with a nocked arrow, Aker spent a seemingly interminable time crawling up to the edge of the cliff with a branch in front of his face and peering down. Apparently satisfied, he crawled back, then went a little way down the bend of the trail.

Grant slipped the pack off his back and stretched his shoulder muscles. Nothing moved below. Aker had stopped on a little ledge and was again peering into the depths below.

Grant yawned, and turned his head automatically at a slight movement to his right, then went rigid as one of the hideous Berl-Cats came out of a cave.

It had not seen him yet, but he could see the nose and whiskers twitching, following some scent. There was a clink of metal from the trail below. The beast looked up alertly, the ears turned in the direction of the sound. With one bound it was at the edge. Aker was on the ledge twenty feet below, his broad back turned helplessly toward the animal.

With the utmost silence, Grant raised his bow. The string was taut and he was sighting down the arrow as the animal's legs tensed to leap. The range was short and the twang of the bowstring and the chunk of the arrow came as one sound. The cat made a small mew of pain as its foreleg was pinned to its ribs. It had leaped as he fired.

Grant saw a perfect example of the reflexes needed to survive in this barbarian world. At the sound of the bowstring, Aker's head had jerked up, and at the sound of the cat's cry, the big man in the leather armour leapt back and had his sword out and braced, blade slanting up, ready to impale anything that landed on him.

If the big cat had landed on Aker, it would have been spitted. It tried hard to do just that, but it could not change its course in midleap. Snarling and twisting and clawing towards him in the air, it passed through the spot where Aker had been, caught with its good foreleg on the edge of the drop, was over-balanced by the failure of its wounded foreleg, and twisted with an outraged mewling over the edge. There was a crash and a sound of rolling and sliding and scrabbling down through the brush.

Aker wiped the hilt of his sword before returning it to his scabbard, and looked up at Grant with more respect than before. "A fair shot, Granto." He waved Grant after him and moved towards the valley.

With caution, alert for the wounded cat, they filed down the path to the trees.

The snow began again, and soon filmed everything in white. The woods ended at the edge of a cleared field and they climbed an embankment onto a rutted farm road. The road swung through the fields and passed close by a sod-covered stone house.

Grant watched it nervously and found his suspicions justified as four bearded men, followed closely by a shrieking woman, ran through the doorway. They howled crude obscenities and swung a wicked assortment of flails and scythes over their heads. It was a startling sight, and Grant flinched back. Aker seemed to find it neither frightening nor interesting. He stood quietly, a bored sneer on his lips, as they approached.

The screaming men were just a few yards away when he whipped out his long sword and bellowed a terrible war-cry. The great weapon flashed just once, and the flails of the first pair were hacked in two. They stared stupidly for a long instant and then fled, howling a more despondent note this time. Long before they had resumed the safety of the house, Aker had turned his back and continued his interrupted course down the road.

The episode reminded Grant again of the value of swordsmanship. He picked up a stick and, as he trudged down the road, swung at every mark that caught his eye, trying to learn to gauge a swing from any angle to hit the spot precisely, imagining the spot as an enemy. It made the time pass entertainingly, and again he felt that sharpening of the senses, almost exhilaration, that seemed to have something to do with the steady exercise and something to do with the clean whiteness of the landscape and much to do with a feeling of irresponsibility.

They stopped at noon by a frozen stream and made a lunch from an unspeakable lump of bread dredged from the depths of the pack. Aker kicked a hole in the ice and they mixed a drink in the horn cups ; half spring water and half wine. It was an invigorating and thirst-quenching drink, particularly since the water seemed to be carbonated and flavoured. Grant smacked his lips over it and made no attempt to understand the geological impossibility that produced it.

VIII

The road wandered up the wide valley and they stuck to it, rather than cut across the furrowed fields. About mid-afternoon the winter ended.

That was the only way that Grant could describe it. They trudged along the road, ankle deep in the snow, with the big flakes falling slowly on all sides. The sky seemed much lighter ahead, then Grant noticed what appeared to be a line drawn across the road. The near side of the road was covered with snow, but beyond the line the warm sun shone on the brown dirt road and green fields. They passed the invisible barrier with no difficulty but, on looking up, Grant saw that none of the snowflakes were getting through. The ones that approached simply vanished.

On three sides stretched a warm and fertile landscape ; behind was a wall of whirling flakes and a frigid winter scene. Grant looked at it dumbfounded.

Sunshine and a warm breeze seemed to please Aker. He opened the collar of his jerkin and took a deep breath of the grass and tree-scented air.

"We're getting close to the army. It's good to feel a little sun on the back. That's why I always like to work for the Good Duke Darikus—he's got gout and can't stand cold

weather. *The sun always shines on Darikus.* That's what they say."

"You mean he's *causing* this warm weather?"

"Sure. He casts a mean spell. Built this one up twenty-five years ago, I hear. Hasn't failed yet. It's always mid-summer around him, no matter what the weather should be."

They had topped a rise in the road and before them lay a green meadow bright with tents and pavilions and dark with the figures of many men. Most of them wore leather or chain armour; a few, mounted on the six-legged horse-like animals, wore full armour of silver and gold. The air was filled with the murmur of many voices, of shouted orders and the clank of steel and sound of bugles. A guard tent stood close by the road, a half dozen pike-men lounging around it.

The nearest soldier sighted Grant and Aker. He levelled his pike across the road and challenged them in a sleepy voice.

"Halt and be recognized. What business here?"

"Free soldiers to serve the Good Duke Darikus."

Satisfied, the soldier lowered his weapon and shouted toward the tent.

"Hey, Corporal, couple more guys want to join up."

There was a stirring in the tent and a young man with long, curling moustaches poked his head out. He looked the two men over with an insulting stare. His gaze fixed on Grant's sagging form, scanned the indoor pallor and the gentle look that was part of the blondness of his hair and eyebrows. The corner of the man's mouth turned back in a sneer.

"Looks like pretty poor material, but I suppose you better take them to the Duke—he'll hire anybody."

Aker spat full in the man's face and loosened his sword in the scabbard.

"Right you are, sonny, he hired *you*. I was fighting with the Good Duke when you were still peeking under your nurse's skirt." Aker started to walk away but turned and added, as a happy afterthought, "Want to fight?"

The corporal wiped his beet-red face and opened and shut his mouth like a fish out of water. He looked more closely at Aker this time. He saw the man's tremendous girth and mighty arms under the travel-stained leather and thought twice. His head popped back into the tent. The soldiers grinned happily and a pair detached themselves to go with Aker and Grant.

They made their way through the camp and up to the largest tent, a sprawling construction of many-coloured cloth. A pennant flew over the entrance, a black, mailed fist squeezing out drops of blood against a white field. The pikemen saluted the flag. Grant and Aker saluted also, then entered the tent.

Armed soldiers stood around the walls. Two littered tables stood in the centre; a thin clerk with ink-stained fingers sat at one, an old man wearing a gold coronet sat at the other. Aker stepped forward and saluted with a thump of his fist against his chest.

"Hail, Duke. I am here to serve you."

"Hail, hell. Who are you and what's *that* with you?" the Duke replied testily, and shifted his bandage-wrapped foot on its cushion.

"Aker Amen and spear slave."

Grant started to protest his new status but closed his mouth when he realised that Aker undoubtedly knew best how to handle the situation. The affair with the corporal of the guard proved that. The clerk was rapidly flipping pages in a giant, leather-bound book. He ran his finger down one page and then read from the selected line.

"Amen, Aker, born Inin, Master Swordsman, Axe Expert, Excelling Infighter, qualified on dirk, mace, arbolest, cross-bow, scimiter . . ."

"All right, all right!" The testy voice of the Good Duke interrupted him. "Two gold *Enn* a day, and loot for you, loot for the slave and pick of the captured weapons. Done?"

"Done," Aker roared. "We fight to the death!" He slammed the flat of his hand down on the table, signifying his acceptance of the contract. The Good Duke slammed his down too and winced as the vibrations shook his gouty foot. Grant wondered if he should slam also, but Aker turned and pushed him out of the tent.

There were more men milling about now, and Grant saw why when they formed a ragged line leading to a giant stew kettle. He and Aker quickly joined the end of the line. As they shuffled forward he thought over the recent past, then turned to Aker.

"You never told me—who are we going to fight?"

"I don't know. What difference does it make? Get some chow, you're next."

When they each had a horn cup full of steaming stew and were finishing it off as they walked along looking for tent

space, Aker spoke again with his mouth full. "Ask an officer. He might know."

"Maybe later." Grant walked, absorbing the sun warmth and the rich mingled flavour of meats and potatoes and rice and unidentified vegetables. He was beginning to accept Aker Amen's philosophy. "Not a bad stew."

The Duke was planning to attack the Tyrant Helbida, whoever that was. The fifth man Grant asked told him that much, but no one knew when they would attack, not even the Good Duke himself. According to the talk of the camp, every evening at sundown His Goodness cast a pair of twelve-sided astrological dice onto a silken cloth. So far the omens and portents of the dice had not been favourable for the morrow, so the army stayed in the encampment, eating and guzzling, lounging and quarrelling, and polishing up on the arts of slaughter.

Twice a day, everyone turned out to the drill field, the soldiers and officers rounding up all the reluctant novices and conscripts that could not escape, and herded them to the field where they hammered away at each other with an earsplitting rattle and clamour. The experienced soldiers worked out against each other with live steel; beginners and those less competent were given wooden swords and poles for spears.

The novices were prevented from leaving the field during drill, but otherwise were not watched, so Grant transferred himself from the spear men to the group learning the broadsword. The reluctant beginners belaboured each other, sweating and bruised, often angry and cursing, urged on by shouts from the officers. Grant found quickly when a parry was poor by picking himself up from the dust. But he husbanded his strength, put brains into his fighting, was watchful of techniques and thought about his mistakes when he picked himself up . . . and he kept up the practice in the after hours when most of the others left the field.

In a few days Grant sported a mask of colourful bruises and lumps, and a vastly improved fighting technique. Aker Amen, strolling over after working out with the swordsmen, sometimes separated Grant from his novice opponent and picked up a wooden sword to give Grant a few painful but useful demonstrations of professional swordsmanship.

The fifth day a new element was added. For the entertainment of the professional soldiers and the officers who lined up on the sides, shouting encouragement and making bets, the end of the afternoon's drill was turned to a free-for-all. The trainees were turned loose on the field with instructions to fight, and keep fighting until disarmed or unconscious. The only rule was to keep the combat single combat still, but the rule was not enforced. Broken bones and missing teeth were in evidence from the moment the fray started.

One group of thickset louts, obviously farm conscripts, were the terror of the field ; they stuck together, attacking in such close sequence that no outsider had time to collect his scattered wits between one bout and another. Soon their end of the field was scattered with the defeated, and a wide clear space was being given them by the others. Their leader was a young giant named Splug, who seemed to be beating down everyone he encountered by sheer weight and strength and fatness.

Grant tried to stay to one side and fight a quiet defensive fight without attracting attention to himself, but this time he had an appointment with destiny. He was due to find out something about himself, a fact he had kept hidden for an entire lifetime.

Splug saw him from the distance and shouted, then charged with a roar of laughter, evidently deceived by Grant's mild expression and unassuming stoop.

Slobbering, he swung a simple overhand blow down at Grant with the clumsy simplicity of chopping wood. Grant parried it easily and thumped the other in the ribs on the return stroke. Angered, Splug swung again with tremendous force and weight, his muscles standing out under his fat. Grant's guard held, but by sheer push, he was forced to give ground. Stepping back, he found a wooden sword tip inserted between his feet, tangling them, and lost balance. One of the other farm hands was slyly helping his leader. As Grant tottered, Splug cracked him across the head and roared with laughter. When Grant stepped away from the entanglement and tried to return the blow, a foot tripped him from another direction, and the wooden sword hit his shoulder with a white burst of pain. Splug laughed again.

At that moment Grant felt one of his fits coming on. The ringing began in his ears and the pressure in his temples and the distance from sounds. Why now, of all times ?

The brutes were all around him, all wide and sturdy, and enough alike to be brothers, probably conscripted from the same inbred farm town. They all worked together ; if Grant fell they would probably beat and trample him into the ground. The officers couldn't see what was happening. He had to fight.

He felt as if he were growing. Everything else seemed small and clear and the wooden sword seemed as light in his hand as a matchstick. The blows he received felt light and distant and the blows he struck seemed like taps. He swung countless taps at things that looked like Splug, or perhaps the same tap over and over ; it was all the same. But through the distance, he was aware that he was enjoying himself. He felt relaxed ! There was no resistance either inside or outside, as in a dream.

Then startlingly, everything went black. He came up to the surface again, sitting on the ground, holding his aching head in both hands. An officer was standing over him, slapping a weighted cosh into the palm of his hand thoughtfully. He scowled as Grant looked up.

"Just keep your temper after this, me lad. We're here for practice, not for skull cracking."

Grant looked around dazedly at a circle of unconscious figures. Splug was a distance away, sitting up, holding his bloody face and moaning. Across the field the other fighters had stopped and were watching Grant. The entire thing made no sense.

The officer said, "You had reason enough. They were asking for trouble. But when you started to ram the broken end of your sword down the fat one's throat *you* were asking for trouble. I had to tap you one. Just try to save that kind of thing for the enemy from now on."

Looking around with slowly dawning understanding, Grant saw that all the men were Splug's gang. A few were beginning to crawl painfully to their feet and stagger away.

He felt himself blush. "I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to . . ."

"I don't say you didn't give fair warning, howling like that," grinned the officer. "But try to hold your temper down next time."

The grizzled bearlike man walked away, his gold armour glinting, but Grant stood up slowly, thinking of what he had been told—that he had a hot temper !

This was a thing he had never known. What he had been calling fits, and thinking of as illness, was temper, a hot, sudden wish to kill, too primitive for thought, too savage for civilized expression. It was too strange for recognition as part of the Grant they had always called a sweet boy, and a little angel—or later a sensitive type. Finding no outlet of action or thought for the emotion, he had had fits, rigid and shaking, with his mind a blank until the anger passed.

This time the temper had found outlet. He spun slowly on his heel, surveying his victims. The thought occurred that there might be a berserker, among his ancestry. From the Swedish side of his family, he had inherited his blond hair and almost white brows. He could have inherited his disposition also. The ancient Swedes were the people who occasionally produced berserkers, men of apparently gentle disposition who, in battle, changed and killed as savagely and blindly as uncaged tigers.

He stood there in the torn field, looking gentle and worried, not as skinny as before, but still a slim, tall figure with a scholar's stoop and a delicate look. Yet none of the others sneered at his slumped figure, and they left a wide space around him as they returned to their fighting.

He swung the broken sword in an idle pattern as he walked off, badly worried with the wonder of how close he had been the other times during his life. How near had he been to committing murder when he thought he was just being sick?

IX

The next fit came just two nights later. He and Aker had been drinking late in a tent across the camp. They were weaving back, leaning on each other and singing one of the plaintive melodies of this world. Aker sang the verses and Grant came in, loud and flat, on the chorus.

*She told the king no, but smiled at me
And lifted her dress above her pink knee
I said, why bless me, I never did see
Such a . . .*

A dark figure stepped out from behind a tent and landed a heavy blow on the back of Aker's head. The big soldier dropped, the breath whooshing from his limp body, and simultaneously Grant was backhanded to the ground by a gloved fist, his uncertain balance easily destroyed.

The man stepped out into the moonlight and Grant recognised the moustached corporal of the guard, on duty the day he and Aker arrived.

"Nobody spits in *my* face," the man muttered, and raised his foot to grind it down on Aker's face. As a burst of icy distance and rage shot through his brain, Grant swung his wooden sword up across the corporal's throat as if, by hatred, the wood had become a real sword. It seemed a light blow, but the man began to crumble together, then hunched over and poured blood out of his mouth as from a tilted bottle, and continued bending more and more until he folded down onto the ground, a shrunken and writhing bundle, rapidly becoming still. Grant stared numbly until he remembered he had heard of the deadly trick of breaking the larynx. Apparently he'd done it.

As Grant pulled himself to his feet, he became aware for the first time that someone else was there. The flap on a lighted tent had been thrown back and a man stood there watching. From the rings that flashed on his fingers, he must be a noble of some kind. He laughed suddenly, and Grant recognised him—the officer who had knocked him out on the drill field.

"Remember what I said, about controlling your temper."

He noticed Grant's tense position and laughed again. "Don't worry, I'm not going to turn you in. Anyone who hits a man in the midst of a good song deserves what he gets. Drag your friend in here and pour some wine down his throat. I want to hear the rest of that verse. I thought I knew all of them !"

He turned back for an instant. "Bring the body in too. The armour and weapons are yours by right of conquest, anyone who can kill with a wooden sword deserves a man's weapon."

The next day Grant swaggered through the camp in leather armour with a bow and quiver of arrows slung on his back and the weight of a light broadsword at his belt. He enjoyed the way the servants and slaves of the camp scurried out of his path, the deference they gave a fighting man, and noticed the eyes of the women camp followers turning to him as he went by.

Then he felt something like a fool as he carefully took off his armour at the practice field and picked up a wooden sword

to practice with. He showed himself no more strong or skilled than the day before when he had been merely ranked as a slave. But he lost himself in the exercise and the day passed quickly. At the dinner call, Grant grounded his sword, suddenly aware of weariness, but aware he had learned and improved.

He went to buckle his armour back on. After only one day it was beginning to feel like a second skin and he had felt naked without it.

Aker went by with the stream of men heading for the stew line and slapped him on the shoulder as he passed, which he had been doing often since Grant had won his armour, his way of expressing his pleasure in what had happened.

At the meal line the word was passed. The cast of the Duke's dice had been favourable. Tomorrow they would fight. There was a rush of last minute readying of weapons, and a blowing of discordant bugles for formations.

They marched in the morning against the forces of the Independent Free State of the Tyrant Helbida. The Tyrant's castle stood some miles up the valley. They didn't reach it until afternoon.

The Duke's forces halted in a rough semi-circle about the base of the castle and awaited orders. The castle was of black stone and seemed to grow out of the rugged valley wall. Flags flew from the battlements and occasionally a helmeted head could be seen peering over the edge.

There was a parley and one of the Good Duke's men rode into the castle through an opened postern. Some time later, the gate clanged open and the officer rode back, clutching the bleeding place in his face where his nose had been.

This decided the Duke. He waved his sword, the bugles blew loudly off key, and the men surged forward. They crushed around Grant, who clutched at the spear he had been issued and was pushed forward.

The air was filled with arrows and the roar and crash of battle. The first line of men carried wide shields and scaling ladders which they placed against the sheer walls. Men were clambering up the ladders under a canopy of arrows from bowmen in the rear. Their fire was keeping the parapets fairly clear, but archers concealed behind the crenellations and fire slots poured down a withering rain of arrows at those on the ground.

Grant saw men dropping on all sides, but there were always more pressing from behind. Then he was in the comparative safety of the base of the wall, too close for the archers at the slots to see him. He got his hands on the rungs of a ladder and started to climb. At the next ladder he saw Aker Amen climbing rapidly.

Two forces pulled at him as he clutched the rough wooden rungs. He was conscious of a desire to prove his new-won strength and to keep up with Aker. But one corner of his civilised brain tried to drag him away from that deadly battle. What was the percentage of getting killed in some foolish little war?

No percentage at all Grant mumbled as he clawed his way up the ladder. *But if you want to live like a man, you have to be ready to die like one.*

The man ahead of him fell off when a heavy rock bounced from the top of his head. Grant tried to catch him but it was over too fast. Then he rapidly ran up the cleared ladder until he was two-thirds of the way to the top.

He turned, grinning, to shout to his friend Aker, just in time to see an arrow pierce Aker's neck from side to side.

For an instant the big soldier's hands held their grip on the ladder, and Grant stared into the glazed, sightless eyes. Then Aker was gone over the side of the ladder, gone forever, and there was another man there climbing up from below.

Something hot snapped in Grant's head. Without any dizzying transition he was the berserker, cold with hate, and life became a simple matter of efficiently murdering the maximum number of the enemies of Aker Amen. He climbed.

Men were dying ahead of him, and then he was the first man on the ladder. The top of the wall was ahead, and an archer was peering down at him over a half-drawn bow. Grant drove his spear up into the man's eyesocket and pulled it back with a cold precision as the point crushed through flesh and bone. The man fell past him like a harpooned fish.

Before another could fill the dead man's gap. Grant had a hand on the rough stone and pulled himself over the edge. A helmed knight swung a war axe down at his head and Grant barely rolled aside in time. The axe clanked a chip out of the granite crenellation. Before the knight could shift the axe, Grant had clutched him by the leg and thrown him over the

edge of the parapet. The man's vanishing shout was followed by a satisfying clang from the foot of the wall.

In the instant before anyone else stepped forward, Grant managed to stand up and swing his spear in front of him. The point caught one of the Tyrant's men in the throat and he died with a hoarse gurgle. Though he was already dead the force of his rush sent him into Grant's arms. In the instant that Grant supported the corpse, three arrows thunked into its back.

The cold berserker rage controlled Grant's every move. He didn't drop the body—it made too good a shield for arrows. Instead he pried the broadsword from the convulsive death clutch of the man's fingers. Then he had time for his first look at the rest of the battle for the wall.

It wasn't going so well for the Good Duke. The few soldiers who had reached the wall were being rapidly killed, while cauldrons of hot oil were clearing the ladders below. On Grant's left there was a mixed tangle of battling men. On his right all of the ladders had been pushed away and at least a dozen of the Tyrant's men were rushing at him.

All of this took less than an instant to see, and in the same instant his berserker's mind made its decision. With a wordless cry he hurled the arrow-studded corpse at the group of attackers and leaped after it.

The very suddenness of the attack saved his life. Yet it was impossible to be in that melee of knives and swords without being cut. Blood ran from a score of wounds that he didn't feel. The Tyrant's men suffered far greater losses. Grant's whirling sword hacked through flesh and armour. When the soldiers came close enough his dagger ripped at their entrails.

Some of the nearest men quailed back before his fury, tangling the men behind. This only made their deaths more certain. Grant clutched the blood-wet pommel of his sword and chopped away at them. A few fell inside the wall; one managed to turn and run away. The rest were dead or dying at Grant's feet.

For that instant the section of the wall was cleared. Grant held the sword up, ready for the next attack. It never came. Slowly the red mist faded from before his eyes and he became aware of the aching soreness of his body. It was with a degree of surprise that he noted the blood soaking into his tunic

and the gaping red mouth of a long slice across his right thigh. A clean cut, inches deep, slowly oozing blood from both ends.

Then he glanced up from the wound and saw that he was standing just above the mechanism that operated the drawbridge. Automatically his architect's eye took in the details of the crude windlass and pulleys.

The ramp of the drawbridge wasn't vertical, which meant it dropped of its own weight. Two giant supporting chains were attached to the outer end, they wrapped around an immense rotating log. This was in turn connected by a series of pulleys to the windlass. The pulleys added *some* mechanical advantage, but still exerted a good deal of pull on the windlass mechanism. A great cog wheel was bolted to the windlass drum, this cog was held in place by a metal pawl. A loop of rope kept the pawl from slipping.

It was absurdly simple. A piece of rope, no thicker than Grant's middle finger, was all that held up the drawbridge. Cut that and the bridge would drop.

Well—why not?

While his civilized mind was still pondering it, his new-found reflexes sent him off the wall. It was just as well he had jumped because an arrow went through the spot where he had stood an instant before. His wounded leg collapsed when he hit the platform below and he ground his teeth together with the pain. But all he had to do was stand up and stagger a few feet. A single stroke of his sword severed the pawl-rope.

Nothing happened. Friction and rust in the ancient mechanism were enough to keep it from moving.

A shout went up from someone who had seen Grant jump and a squad rushed his way. He kicked the cog wheel with his good leg and it began to revolve slowly. As inertia overcame friction it turned faster and faster.

With a great squealing of pulleys and rattling of chains the drawbridge slammed down into position. A tremendous cheer rose from the Duke's army massed outside. They rushed forward and all of the men inside the courtyard turned to face them. Grant was completely forgotten for the moment, an interested spectator to the battle.

The Good Duke's army thundered across the drawbridge and crashed into the portcullis, a sturdy looking gate of thick iron bars. They thrust their swords through the grill and

howled at the defenders inside. A shower of arrows was their answer and a rush by the gate guards.

A confined and wicked battle developed around the portcullis. The Tyrant's men had no way of beating off the attack, while the Good Duke's men couldn't get through. There was much jabbing of swords through the grill and still moaning bodies were trampled underfoot. It was the Good Duke himself who ended the impasse.

Surrounded by his household troops he pushed up to the front of the attackers. His guards carried eight foot lances and used them to clear the other side of the portcullis. Under the protection of their shields, the Good Duke crouched against the steel bars. From his raised viewpoint Grant could see the Duke clearly.

It must have been magic of some sort. The warm sunshine in midwinter proved that the Good Duke Darikus was a powerful worker of the arcane arts. Probably counter-spells had stopped him during the attack from outside. But now that he had penetrated the walls he met with more success. He sprinkled something on the bars of the portcullis, and passed his hand over them. His mouth worked as he mumbled a spell.

The results were gratifying. The bars shimmered in a sudden haze and turned a mottled red. They looked as if they had been rusting for a thousand years. When the soldiers cheered and charged, the bars fell into rusty shards.

By force of arms and magic the Good Duke Darikus had captured the castle. And he was aware of the part Grant had played. He saw Grant standing by the windlass and saluted him with his sword pommel before leading the final charge. Only the memory of Aker's death kept a glow of grim pride from Grant at that moment.

X

It was just at that instant that the scene before him froze. That was the only way he could think of it. Men seemed stopped in mid-stride and the sounds of battle died away like the ringing of bells in still air. Even the sunlight was frozen and solid.

The voices rumbled like thunder in the distance and Grant could almost understand their words.

"Grissel, now look where you put that thread!"

"Where I put it . . . we all know where the blame lies. Give me the eye . . . I thought so. It goes over here. Your stupidity has almost ruined the pattern."

There was no feeling of transition. The scene before Grant was swept away and instantly replaced by another. It took a time for his befuddled senses to make out what it was.

Leaning stones. Gravestones. And a church. The memory they dredged up seemed incredibly ancient, but he recognised it. The sword slipped from his limp fingers and fell to the ground. He was home in his own world. Back in the same churchyard he had vanished from.

His rising elation was abruptly cut off as this vanished in turn, to be replaced by the formless time he remembered only too well.

"You can't just push him back like that—repercussions will alter the design in every direction."

"Simply done, you old hag. I'll just take a knot in time. Then nothing will be remembered . . . nothing . . ."

"What has happened . . . what he has done . . . will be as never was."

Eternity-wide laughter cackled and rolled.

Grant leaned against the stone wall, trying to hold onto a precious memory that kept slipping away from him. Something had happened during his attack; he couldn't remember quite what. The formal coat hugged him tightly across the shoulders, yet his thin wrists stuck well out of the sleeves. When he looked at his wrists they seemed wrong. For some incomprehensible reason he kept thinking they ought to be stronger, browner—dirtier. Yet he couldn't grasp why.

That should have been the end of it. The memories would die and he would go back into the church just as he had left it.

Except for an oversight. One raveled, loose end of his thread that hadn't been clipped off.

Looking past his skinny wrists he saw the sword on the ground, still wet with undried blood. Unbelievably he bent and picked it up. Heavy and crude, the blade was nicked and dirty as well. Yet it was the most precious thing in the world to him.

It was the key to what had happened. As long as he looked at it he could remember the snow, the Good Duke, the Berl-Cats, the war—and Aker Amen. Bloody, frightening memories of a barbarian world now impossibly distant. But they were precious memories too.

"Granty—where are you dear? You must hurry."

His mother's shrill voice penetrated and brought him back with a start. He straightened up slowly and let the sword fall back to the ground. It had done its work, he was finished with it.

When he walked back into the church he seemed to be the same tall and skinny young man in the tight coat. Only his back was erect for the first time anyone there had ever noticed.

"—where have you been, don't you know it's time? I thought by now—" His mother's voice sounded like a phonograph record played backwards too fast, and made about as much sense.

"Oh, shut up," Grant growled. "And go and tell Lucy I want to see her at once. It's important."

His mother's voice cut off in mid-gripe, and Herb Collomb's pipe dropped from his suddenly slack jaw and clattered to the floor.

After three gasping tries, his mother managed to choke out her words.

"What's come over you? You're not well. You *know* you can't see Lucy before the ceremony, she's in her *wedding gown*—so it is impossible, the bride and groom never . . ."

"I don't give a damn for your silly superstitions," Grant roared the words into his mother's face. "I said to get her in here—or should I do it myself?"

Grant's mother started to say something about blasphemy in church, but a single glance at his face sent her scuttling sideways like a crab, out of the room. Herb managed to retrieve his pipe and stuff it back into his mouth while Grant paced like a caged tiger.

Lucy steamed in, flushed with anger. "What do you mean by this, Grant, seeing me now. The ceremony is late as it is."

"Let them wait," Grant laughed. "After all, it's our wedding and we'll do it in our own way. It's just that I had to tell you how wonderful everything is and how much more different things are going to be than you or I had ever dreamed . . ."

In his exuberance he had taken her in his arms. She would soon be his wife, that's where she belonged.

"Stop that, you fool," she squealed. "This is neither the time nor the place—and you're crushing my lace!"

"The hell with your lace," Grant mumbled and his mother wailed again over the blasphemy. Things weren't going at all the way he had planned.

This was really the first time he had ever held Lucy so close. In the past they had always pecked a single good-night kiss from a distance. She was a lot bonier than he had realised and her skin was pale and mottled under the make-up. The barbarian girls had been much plumper and more feminine than this. He forced the thought from his guilty mind—after all, this was the girl he loved. Or did he? The thought hit him so suddenly that he let go of her and stepped back.

Both women were screeching at him now, but he didn't hear the words. Just the sound, like a pair of cats howling on the back fence.

Love her? He had never held her in his arms before, or really kissed her. They had always prided themselves on their intellectual match. How the devil did he ever put up with that—and how had he ever got involved with her in the first place? Weren't her parents old friends of his mothers?

"Mother!" he said fiercely. They both shut up instantly at his tone. "Did you frame up this marriage? Did the two of you collaborate to put a ring in my nose? I want to know more about this before I go through with this ceremony."

"Well, I know enough right now," Lucy screamed in a high, cracked voice. "This marriage is off, postponed—until you apologise and act decently."

"Right you are," Grant interrupted calmly. "Marriage is off and you can keep the ring for a souvenir. Marry in haste, repent at leisure I always said."

Lucy gagged at his words. Of course her threat had only been a gambit to get him back into line. But something had gone terribly wrong.

Before either of them could find their voices again, Grant had pushed Lucy and his mother into the next room.

"Faint in here," he said quietly. "There's a soft rug."

Then he backed out, closed the door and turned the key in the lock. Herb sat quietly puffing his pipe, looking on.

"Congratulations," Herb said. "I hope you'll be very happy."

Grant's scowl turned to a smile as he caught the sincerity of his friend's words. "You're not running out too?" he asked.

"On the contrary," Herb said, standing up and knocking his pipe out. "You have just made me feel better than I ever thought possible. Now tell me what in blazes has suddenly come over you after all these years."

"It will take a bit of explaining," Grant said as he clapped his friend on the arm. His fingers closed on Herb's rock-hard biceps and triceps. Grant's smile vanished as he pinched his own pipestem arm. All the painfully won muscle was gone as if it had never been.

"What's the best way to build muscle and get into some kind of decent shape? A quick way," Grant asked.

If Herb was startled by the sudden switch in conversation he didn't show it. "Rock climbing, weights, gym work—anything will do it. I'm partial to rock climbing myself. I go every weekend."

"Sounds great," Grant said, and turned to the door. "Now let's find someplace where we can get a stiff drink—or better a bottle—and I'll tell you something you'll have no business believing. And we can make some plans to try out this rock business. Maybe I'll even tell you about a little rock climbing experience I've had."

The world seemed a brighter place; the sky a deeper blue and every detail charged with a deeper meaning than ever had been apparent to him before. Grant quickened the pace, savouring every mouthful of air he pulled into his lungs.

His hard-earned muscle, experience and reflexes were gone—but they could be built up again easily enough. As long as he had the desire and the knowledge to do it. And that he still had.

He silently saluted the memory of Aker Amen and that strange world he would never see again.

The two friends turned the corner and walked slowly from sight.

—Harry Harrison and Katherine MacLean



THE LOCUSTS

This month's new author is an Australian and in view of the increasing interest in fantasy and science fiction "down under" we think it particularly apt that some of our new blood is coming from the other side of the world. There is an Australian atmosphere about this story, too, which makes a nice change from an American or European setting.

By R. WHITFIELD YOUNG

They came out of the sky on a clear day. The sun shone brilliantly on a world of green, on fields of unripe wheat that stretched into the distant gum trees and verdant hills. Then suddenly it was blotted out. In the sky a cloud seemed to have gathered and a thick shadow fell across the earth.

Owen Russell saw the locusts from the machinery shed. It was late in the afternoon and work was over for the day; no one was in sight. He ran across to the men's huts, calling to the others. Paterson had heard the whirr of wings and was already stumbling down the steps, his head turned to the brown cloud low over the far wheatfields. Clewes joined them. They climbed into the Land Rover and started out.

By the time they reached the wheat the locusts had crossed the highway and were moving steadily towards Hewat's farm. Russell watched them with uncomprehending interest. They seemed to be moving far too quickly for a locust plague, he thought, and there were no hoppers as far as he could see. There was something strange, something almost impossible about the speed with which they had stripped the wheat.

They walked across the field, surveying the damage. The locusts had moved in a straight line, without deviating, consuming the green wheat and leaving broken stalks swaying slightly in the afternoon breeze. Patches of dark earth could now be seen where an hour before had been only endless green.

"What a mess," Clewes said.

"I can't understand it." Russell's soft voice was more unemphatic than usual. "We weren't notified that any locusts were moving towards this district. They usually tell us long before. These things seemed to come from nowhere."

They crossed the fields, noting the places where most damage had been done and calculating the loss. There was nothing else they could do. The labour of months had been wasted.

Russell was silent on the way back, though Clewes and Paterson discussed the event ceaselessly. At last he spoke.

"There's something else strange about this business," he said. "You know how often you see dead locusts, or at least some crawling about with broken wings after a plague. But we didn't see one in the fields. Not one."

"Surely you're not trying to suggest something . . . well, supernatural about these things, are you?" asked Paterson wryly.

"It's beyond me. I don't know what to think."

When they reached the homestead again, Russell saw Crisp's car coming along the highway. He waited for it. The dog by his feet began to bark and he patted it, telling it to lie down.

"It's only Crisp," he said. "He's all right."

The car drew up beneath the blue gum by the side of the steps and Crisp joined him. He was a tall fellow, about thirty, with a head that seemed over large. They had been the best of friends ever since Russell had come to the district soon after the war.

"Why the dejected look, old boy?" asked Crisp with a smile. He was one of those people who find life a continual joke.

"We've just had a plague of locusts," Russell told him. "They've stripped half my fields bare."

Crisp looked at him as though he thought it might be a jest. He saw that it wasn't. "That's not the best of news to greet me with, is it? I didn't hear anything about a plague in town."

"This was the first we heard about it. They came and went before we realised what was happening."

"That seems strange."

"It's unbelievable. Usually they stay for days until every scrap of green has gone. Of course they may come back, but they seemed to be moving off in a pretty definite direction. Come on inside."

They went up the steps together, followed by the dog.

"How's Faye?" asked Crisp.

"Much the same as usual. The doctor's going to give us a report next month. We're praying that it will have something hopeful in it, but there's not much of a chance after all this time."

They entered the bedroom. Faye brightened when she saw that Crisp was with Russell, then she noticed her husband's frown. She looked at him with troubled eyes.

"What is it?" she said quickly. "Marge said that something had happened and you'd gone off in the Land Rover."

"Locusts. They've done quite a lot of damage to the wheat"

"But there was no word about it. Did you know?"

"We haven't heard a thing. If we had we could have sprayed."

"You always say that it's too costly for so small a farm."

"It's better than losing a crop. And Hewat and Lynch would have had their wheat done at the same time. The cost could have been shared."

They had the meal beside Faye's bed, as usual, but there was little talk. It was so unlike the meals that they generally had together. Russell was thinking, wondering. Crisp made one or two attempts at jokes. No one laughed; they were like firecrackers which fizzled without exploding. Even Faye, who usually said how much she enjoyed his sense of humour, was too aggravated by this new setback to listen to him with complete attention. She lay there eating slowly, her skin even paler than usual, and contrasting her black hair and the rose in her cheeks with surprising vividness in the glow of the electric light. Crisp saw that the evening was not going to be a success and left towards nine o'clock, considering it wiser to let them discuss the plague as they wanted to alone.

"What will it mean, Owen?" Faye asked when he had gone.

Russell passed a hand wearily across his mouth, feeling the dryness of his lips. "It means almost the end of this year's crop."

"I suppose that's the same thing as debt."

"It may be. It depends on how much we can save."

"And another bad year next year?"

"That will mean ruin." His voice was scarcely audible.

She turned away from him and faced the wall without speaking again. Russell didn't move. He knew very well what she was thinking; he knew that she wasn't strong enough to take many more calamities from life. The fire of pity burned deep in his bowels and he could do nothing to prevent it.

Crisp came again the following day at noon. Russell had gone into town.

"He's trying to find out who else suffered the plague," Faye told him as he kissed her.

"Is he particularly worried about it?"

"Wouldn't you be?"

"These things happen." Crisp spoke with the optimistic fatalism with which people usually accept a disaster which doesn't directly affect them. "You have to face them with a smile, otherwise they get you down."

"Owen can't afford to lose an entire crop. He just hasn't got the money."

"He seems to make a fair fist of the farm."

"Yes, he seems to. But he's an idealist. He believes that his workers should have the best of everything, so he builds them two self-contained cottages. That cost money. Then there was my fall. He insisted on giving me the best medical attention in the country; you know how much he had to pay just to have the ambulance take me the three hundred miles to Sydney."

"No, I hadn't thought of all those things."

"Then he pays Marge a fair wage to do the housekeeping and to nurse me."

"Maybe he is in a bad way."

"He should never have been a farmer. He's too much of a dreamer. He should have gone into something where he could think and create."

"Why did he take it on?"

"Imagination. He thought he was too old to start training for something new when the war finished. The government

offered him the farm and he thought he could do something with it. After all he was brought up in wheat land. I suppose he would have struggled through if we hadn't had so much bad luck."

"He's given a lot for you, Faye. I've got to credit him with that much."

"It's hard to take pity for three years. Sometimes it makes me want to shout at him to see him looking at me with tenderness, afraid to say anything that might upset me." She laughed grimly. "That's why I fell for you when you started to come out here. At least you treated me as though I was a woman and not the cripple that I am."

He laughed and leant across to kiss her. She drew away after a moment of contact.

"I don't feel like it, Dan. I'm too sick of everything : of life and accidents, of you and me. Everything's rotting."

Crisp had known her in moods like that before. He lit a cigarette for her and one for himself and they talked at random until Russell arrived. He came into the room with head lowered, not even bothering to greet them.

"Did you find anything out?" asked Faye.

"A lot. Much more than I can understand."

Crisp laughed. "There's much more in life than any of us can understand," he said pleasantly.

Russell glanced at him with dull eyes and turned away to look through the window. The sky was cloudless, bright with sunlight, and the trees around the house swayed rhythmically in the soft wind, like grotesque yet graceful dancers. You wouldn't have suspected that anything out of the ordinary had happened if it hadn't been for the ravaged fields in the distance, an ugly confusion of green smudged with brown.

"The locusts have been through every farm for miles around," he said. "They all have the same thing to say : no warning, just the sudden cloud coming out of the sky. And it always happens just before dusk. By the time they get to the fields, the locusts have moved on."

"It seems funny," said Crisp.

"But that's not all." Russell still didn't turn from the window. "There've been reports of similar plagues in Argentina and South Africa."

"Is that so uncommon?"

"It could be. Locusts sometimes move from one country to another if the winds are right, but it's not very often that they appear simultaneously in countries so far apart."

"Coincidence."

"It might be. Some of us are beginning to wonder."

"What do you make of it?"

At last Russell turned from the window. "I don't know. I've got no idea in the world." He moved towards the door and stopped. "Are you staying to dinner again?"

"All right."

"I'll see you then. Don't let this worry you too much, Faye. You know it's not good for you."

For a moment he smiled tenderly towards her, then left the room. The others watched him go and listened to his footsteps moving through the house and down the steps.

"He's going to the machinery shed," Faye said quietly.

"To think. Surely he must do something else down there. He spends enough time there."

"Occasionally he fiddles with things that are broken, trying to find some way to make them work better. But he likes to think. It's his only hobby really."

"Poor old Owen," laughed Crisp.

The locusts returned the following week. Once again they came suddenly and left leaving destruction behind before Russell or the others could do anything. He drove out with Clewes and Paterson.

"This is too much," he said. "They haven't even touched the damaged fields. They've attacked the rest of the crop."

"It's uncanny," said Clewes.

"Bull," Paterson said. "They'd naturally go for the fields that gave them the most to eat."

"There's nothing we can do about it now, anyway. It's the end of this harvest. You two take the Land Rover and I'll walk back later. I want to have a look around."

"We'll wait."

"No, I'd rather do it alone."

"If that's what you want, okay," Paterson gave a shrug and climbed back into the Land Rover.

"You'd better phone anyone past Hewat's," Russell said. "That's where they're heading."

He heard the engine start up as he turned and walked into the broken wheat. There was nothing to see, nothing but

waste and desolation, the shattered hopes of his life. It all seemed so useless. One disaster after another became too much for any one to bear with fortitude, he thought, unless like Crisp you didn't take life seriously.

It was then that he found the locust. He might never have seen it against the dark earth if he hadn't almost stepped on it. He was reminded again that there was a strange absence of insects which lay about hurt or dying, as there usually were after a plague, and he bent down to look at it more closely. Immediately he saw that it had no legs. He picked it up and with a profound shock realised that it was metal. Minutes passed before the full significance of his discovery slowly came to him.

He turned the locust over in his hand again and again. It was the same shape as a normal insect, perhaps longer ; and though it had no legs, the wings opened as those of a locust would and he found that he could move them, as if they were beating. What metal they were made of he couldn't say. He was sure that he had never seen it before. It was naturally brown in colour and even lighter than aluminium. A half an hour had passed before he realised that it was growing dark. Claspng the metal locust in his hand, he set off at a rapid pace for the homestead.

He went straight to the machinery shed. By the light of the electric globe he saw that the locust was made in two parts, joined just below the wings. With care so that the delicate metal should not be splintered, he finally succeeded in prising them apart. Inside there was a fine mesh of wires ; it worked by some electronic device. He tried to make out how it could destroy crops, for quite obviously it didn't eat them. It was beyond him. The complexities of the machinery were the result of a mind scientifically superior to his by far. When he went into the house night had fallen.

Faye called to him and he went into the bedroom.

"Where have you been ? I was beginning to think you were lost." Her lips were petulant.

"Have you heard about the locusts ?"

"Yes. Clewes came and told me."

"I found one of them."

"Did it take you all that time ?"

"Here it is."

"Oh, take it outside. You know I hate anything like that."
"It's metal."

She stared at him. He placed it on her bed. For a moment she didn't move. Her eyes were fixed upon it. Then slowly she reached out and touched it, finally picking it up and turning it over.

"What does it mean?" Her voice was no more than a whisper.

"It means that this is no ordinary plague. Somehow somebody has learnt to make these things and can direct them towards crops."

"No. You're joking. I don't believe that."

She had dropped the locust and was staring at it with wide, fearful eyes: the colour of a winter's sky, he thought. He sat down wearily beside her and took her hand.

"I don't know just how important it is, Faye. It may mean that some country has a weapon that will enable it to defeat the entire world."

"How?"

"These things could strip the earth bare in a few months. With nothing to eat every one must slowly starve to death. No matter how advanced we think we are, we still depend on the soil for food. Without it, it's the end of man. Even the atom bomb couldn't be so destructive as to wipe vegetation from the earth."

"But who'd do a thing like that?"

"I don't know that. No one's sure what's going on behind the Iron Curtain. Or America may have learnt a lot more than they care to admit. These things may even be something that's got out of hand at Woomera. Then there's the possibility that they're not man-made at all, that they come from another world."

"That's foolish."

"Is it? Yesterday both of us would have scoffed if any one had told us that metal locusts could destroy crops."

"But another world, Owen. It's so fantastic."

"I thought that until a few hours ago. Now I'm beginning to wonder what's going on in the stars above us, or in other galaxies. If some planet did want to populate earth, the easiest way would be to make sure no one was here to stop them. And if the locusts continue their attacks it can only be a few years before food supplies are gone and every one is dead."

"It's horrible to think about."

"But not so unlikely as it seemed yesterday. This has taken on tremendous proportions, Faye. It's not just our burden, but a huge catastrophe facing the whole world."

"And what can we do about it?"

"The first thing to do is to get this locust to someone who can make something of it: the C.S.I.R.O., perhaps. They may be able to learn how it works and how it destroys the crops. I can't. It's far too complex for me."

Russell sent the locust away next morning with a long letter. He had stayed up throughout the night studying it, but had learnt nothing new.

During the following weeks reports of new plague came in from all over the world. As well as Australia, the United States, France, Canada, India and Egypt all suffered attacks. For some time there was no mention that the locusts were in any way out of the ordinary. Most thought it one of the natural scourges that, from time to time throughout history, visit the earth. Then locusts were found on various farms and sent to the authorities in the capital cities. The startling news leaked out. Finally the newspapers announced that they were artificial.

People began to fear the coming of the locusts. They had now become quite regular, appearing in the same places again and again, and always at the same time. Russell knew that they passed through his district every Friday afternoon just before dusk.

Once, walking in the fields, he found his dog lying on the bare earth. It was almost without hair and over its flesh were gaping wounds. He felt a surge of pity for the animal, realising how bewildered it must have been to be caught in something it couldn't understand; he hoped its death had been instantaneous. After seeing what the locusts could do to a living animal he gave orders that no one should go outside on Friday afternoons, or on any day just before dusk.

A number of theories were advanced as to the origins of the locusts. Many were fantastic, many ingenious, but all were mere surmises. No scientist seemed to have learnt exactly how the tiny machines were guided, or where they came from. The only report of any positive value was that the metal was an alloy not previously known.

The Russells had seen rather less of Crisp during those weeks, but one afternoon he came in from town.

"There's a panic there at the moment," he told them. "Everyone's buying up as much tinned and frozen food as they can. The shopkeepers are just about completely out of stock."

"If this keeps up things are going to get grimmer. Those people without food are going to take it if they don't want to die and we'll have anarchy on our hands."

"You're imagining things," Crisp laughed. "The police will make sure nothing like that happens."

"When the police get hungry enough they'll be leading the others."

"Well I won't be here to see it. I'm going to Sydney."

Faye looked at him quickly. "You didn't tell me . . . us," she said.

"I didn't decide until last week. But the country's no place for anyone at a time like this. All the food supplies are concentrated in the big cities. If you had any sense you'd sell out and come with me, old boy."

"No, I'll stay here and try to grow something."

"You won't have a chance."

"I can hope that the plague will stop, and if it does and I can harvest, my work won't be in vain."

"What a hope."

"All my life's been a series of hopes: the hope that war would end, the hope that the farm would be a success, the hope that they could help Faye to walk again. I'm used to hoping, and perhaps this hope will be fulfilled."

"For all our sakes I hope it is."

"When are you going, Dan?" Faye's voice was subdued.

"Next weekend. Saturday, probably. I take the first train I can get on after Friday."

"I see."

Russell looked at his wife for a moment. Her eyes were lowered; her lips were tightly compressed. He glanced at Crisp. He was standing there, tall, self-possessed, an enigmatic smile across his lips. They chatted for a few more minutes until Crisp said it was time that he left.

"I've got a lot of work to do this week," he said. "I can't waste too much time here."

"Are you sure you won't stay for a meal?"

"No, thanks. I'll have to say goodbye now. I may come out one night during the week."

"All right then."

Russell saw him to his car. When he returned to the room Faye was sobbing quietly, her head in her hands. He sat down beside her without speaking. After a few minutes she looked up slowly.

"You knew?" she said with something like a moan.

"Not until a few minutes ago. The old saying that the husband is always the last to know is right after all. He must have laughed at that; he would have thought it a great joke."

"I'm terribly sorry, Owen. I . . . there doesn't seem to be anything else I can say."

Without raising his voice he said, "Thanks. That helps a lot." He went outside. For a few minutes he paced the length of the machinery shed. Then he thought of her accident, of the misery she herself must be feeling. He went inside again. She was lying quite still beneath the bedcovers, her eyes closed.

"Faye?"

She opened her eyes. Tears flowed out. "Yes?"

"I think I understand. Do you remember when you agreed to marry me that I said I was too quiet and serious for you? You needed someone who was gay, someone who seemed to you manly. I've got some idea how he must have appeared to you after lying there in boredom for so many months."

"Oh, shut up!" She began to weep again, then turned and looked at him. "I'm sorry, Owen. It's just that I can't understand a love like yours. It's so full of pity and tenderness, so forgiving, but without any passion."

"We all love in different ways," he said. "Lie down and try to sleep. You must be worn out after a shock like that."

"He was pretty callous about it, wasn't he?"

She closed her eyes. When she was asleep he went into the kitchen. Marge was preparing the evening meal. Without a word he went into the gathering night. He sat against the blue gum. The strangest thing about it, he thought, isn't that I feel injured because of her infidelity; I can forgive her because of what she's been through. But I can't forgive him for hurting her.

After an hour he went into the machinery shed again. He had retained two more locusts that had been found in the fields,

and over the past few weeks had spent short periods, whenever he found time, examining them. They lay on the bench now. He reached up to the shelf above the bench for a knife to prise them open. His mind must have still been on Crisp, for his hand struck a gallon tin of spray, balanced on the edge. It fell. The lid burst open and the spray spilled out across the bench and over the locusts. With an ejaculation of annoyance, he picked the locusts up to shift them. He gasped. They had disintegrated and he was left holding a mass of wires and terminals.

For fully a minute he stared at the remains of the locusts, and then at the spreading stain on the wooden bench.

"Nicotine sulphate," he breathed. "Of all things to attack the metal, a common fruit spray."

He set the wires at the far end of the bench and searched for any remaining pieces of metal. There were a few small splinters, nothing else. Then he went inside. Crisp was forgotten.

Faye was still asleep and he didn't wake her, but took paper and a pen and wrote immediately to the C.S.I.R.O., giving details of his discovery and the spray which had corroded the metal.

There was no answer to his letter for some days. Then the following weekend—on the day Crisp left for Sydney—a car drew up at the side of the homestead. It was covered in fine dust and had evidently travelled some distance. Russell hurried across to meet the two men who climbed out.

"Mr. Russell?" said one. He was a tall, heavily-built man with strong, uneven features. His stature and voice gave the impression of terrific strength.

Russell nodded. "That's right," he said.

"My name's Robertson. I'm from the C.S.I.R.O. This is my assistant, Geoff Phegan."

Russell had raised his eyebrows in surprise. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't realise. Won't you come inside?"

Robertson restrained him with a firm hand. "Not at the moment. We've got something important that has to be done right away. Have you a workroom of some kind where we can leave some apparatus?"

"Only the machinery shed. That's where I usually do my repairs."

"That'll do. Lead the way. Geoff and I can bring the equipment down."

Russell led them to the machinery shed. They had two small cases filled with test tubes, beakers and bottles of liquid. There was also a carton containing seven or eight metal locusts.

"Sorry about the way we're taking over here," Robertson said, "but I assure you it's necessary. I have to have a report back in Sydney by nightfall."

"That's all right," Russell said.

"You set the things up, Geoff, and I'll explain to Mr. Russell what we're doing."

Phegan was a young man, little more than a boy, quiet and reticent. He nodded wordlessly and set about taking the equipment from the cases. Robertson sat down on a box beside Russell. He took out a pipe and began to fill it.

"As soon as we received your letter we started making experiments with nicotine sulphate. You were right. It disintegrates the metal rapidly. Probably one of the few solutions that will: there are one or two solutions related to it that we've tested since your discovery and they give the same results."

Russell listened attentively. This was something that excited him as nothing had in his life before. This was what he had been destined for, he knew at last; his preceding life had been wasted.

"It was a stroke of luck," Robertson went on. "We've been trying every known acid and alkali on the metal for weeks with no result. But now things are looking better."

"Can you stop them?"

"We think so. This spray can be dusted from the normal aeroplane, can't it?"

"Yes."

"Our idea is to dust the areas attacked at the precise moment the locusts come over. The spray should corrode the locusts and cause them to disintegrate."

"If it's concentrated enough. It has to be diluted to spray."

"Yes, we realised that. We've tested dilute solutions and they seep through the metal at certain points. Even if that's all that happens the liquid that gets inside should short the mechanism."

Russell allowed a smile of satisfaction to play around his lips. "When do you propose to begin this?" he asked.

"That's for you to say. You know the exact time they come over here."

"Friday at dusk."

"Good. There's just one more thing: is this spray dusted on wheat normally?"

"No. If any dusting is necessary, in times of plague, say, we use something like calcium arsenite."

Robertson drew the tobacco smoke back and blew it out loudly.

"That's even better," he declared.

"In what way?"

"If it had been used, the potency of the spray should have been enough to cause marks around the jaws of the locusts, if nothing else. They weren't there."

Robertson and Phegan made a number of phone calls during the next two or three hours, one of them to Sydney which lasted almost thirty minutes. Over dinner Robertson told Russell a little more of the authorities' plans.

The Ukraine had had a number of serious attacks in the preceding week, which refuted the theory that the metal locusts were a Russian weapon being used in preparation for a mobilisation of forces. From Asia, too, it was reported that famine was inevitable. Riots had already broken out in Indonesia and China.

"No one knows exactly how much can be done," Robertson said. "The whole world is in a pretty bad way. The Kremlin's even asked us for immediate discussions to determine methods to combat the attacks."

"But we'll be too suspicious of them to tell them anything."

"I don't know. I don't think so; not this time. It's agreed by just about everyone now that these things come from another planet whose inhabitants are preparing for an invasion of the earth."

"Three months ago that would have been incredible."

"The only incredible thing about it now is the high stage of technical ability these people have reached. They can even 'see' us. They must be able to, otherwise they wouldn't be able to direct the locusts straight to the fields that haven't been touched. They have the power to destroy every crop on earth systematically."

"It's terrifying," Russell said softly.

"Perhaps. But it's taught us something : for the first time every country on earth is co-operating to meet the menace. Thanks to your discovery we should be able to stop the locusts, and then we can prepare to defend ourselves if there's an invasion."

During the week that followed Robertson and Phegan were constantly working and phoning so that the entire area could co-ordinate in the defence against the locusts. All over the world the same work was going on. By the weekend the first attempts to stop the locusts would have been made.

On the Friday afternoon, Russell went in to see Faye.

"They'll be over within an hour," he said. "We'll know then whether we've got a chance."

"If we have?"

"We can start over again. The government will have to help those who've lost their crops. We might even have Crisp back again."

"He needn't come here."

Russell forced a laugh. "After all, he and I have been friends for ten years. I couldn't very well refuse him."

"You're such an idealist, Owen. He wasn't much of a friend to you." She looked straight at him, the first time she had gazed frankly at him for months. "Neither of us were."

"Stop being sentimental," Russell said, but there was something swelling in his throat and he knew that he was the sentimentalist. He went to the window. The sun had set and he saw Robertson and Phegan coming out of the machinery shed. "I'd better go down," he said.

She reached out her hand and smiled. "For your sake, Owen, I hope it works," she said.

Embarrassed, he took her hand, then went outside, walking rather faster than was usual for him.

Robertson and Phegan were standing a hundred yards from the house. Robertson had a pistol in his hand. Far above in the clear sky an aircraft circled slowly.

They stood together in silence, waiting for the familiar brown cloud to appear. It came suddenly, sweeping across the wasted earth towards the last acres of standing wheat.

"Ten minutes and we'll know," Robertson said. There was tension in the words.

He raised the pistol. There was a slight pause. The beating of the wings became audible. The pistol roared and a scarlet flare soared into the sky. Almost immediately the plane

banked and dived, gliding close to the earth to meet the oncoming swarm of locusts. A cloud shot out from beneath the fuselage and dropped to the ground. The locusts were enveloped in it.

There seemed no change for a moment, then the beating sound decreased. Robertson let out a slow breath of triumph. The locusts were falling to the ground.

The plane turned and swooped low again. Once more the locusts disappeared into the cloud of spray. More fell. A few were passing across the road towards Hewat's farm. Again and again the plane followed them, dropping the spray continually, intent on preventing the escape of any of them. They lost sight of the swarm and the plane began to climb a few moments later.

"It's worked," Robertson said. "We've beaten them at last. Can we go out to the fields and see the damage?"

Russell nodded towards the Land Rover. He was feeling strangely depressed now that the tension had broken. The three of them walked to the vehicle and drove out to the fields. Already the spray had settled and they could see the brown metal insects lying among the wheat.

They stopped. Robertson and Phegan climbed out and looked around them. They picked up one or two of the locusts. They were in various stages of corrosion, some entirely disintegrated, some merely marked.

"Well, that's it," Robertson laughed. "If they continue to send them along, we'll destroy every one of them." He glanced at Russell brooding over the ravaged wheat. "The world owes you quite a debt, you know."

"To me?" Russell said dully. "That's hard to believe."

"Maybe, but it's true. If they're having the same success overseas, it's the end. Farmers like you will be planting again, and the governments will be deciding how best to defend the earth if there's an invasion."

"We can hope then," Russell said quietly.

Robertson nodded. "We can hope," he agreed. He climbed back into the Land Rover. "I'd better get back to the homestead and send my report to Sydney."

"All right."

Phegan climbed up beside Robertson and Russell started the engine again. He took one last look around before starting off. Dusk was settling, but overhead the sky was clear.

Readers will doubtless remember Mr. Mackin's first Hek Belov story "Criffle-Shaped" in Science Fantasy No. 26. That story was very well received and it gives us pleasure to publish a further incredible and impossible experiment of the great (misjudged) Belov.

AN AFFAIR OF GRAVITY

By EDWARD MACKIN

"Emilio," I said, casually, "how's my credit, old friend?"

He blew his fat cheeks out, and shook his head vigorously, so that his chef's hat did a half turn, and fell off. He dabbed his sweating brow with a chequered oven cloth, and stuck the hat back on his head again, where it trembled like a white explosion.

"You should ask that, Hek Belov," he growled, pointing a fork at me. "And what you expect the answer is, eh? The answer is no, no, no! No steak, no chips, no cherry pie. No nothing. Your credit is finish. One more meal, and you will be living on my overdraft. How you think I make a profit, huh? Thirty-one-pounds you owe me, Belov."

"Let's not quarrel over a few measly pounds, old friend," I pleaded. "It is quite likely that some day I will be in a position to make both our fortunes. All I ask for is a decent meal, cooked in your own inimitable fashion, so that my brain cells can get to work. Just now they are on a sit-down strike for more sustenance."

Needless to say, my friends, I have seen better days. Once I had a job that lasted twelve months. Twelve whole months. Now I am lucky if I get a month's work in twelve. The trouble is that there are too many cyberneticists, and far too many self-repair machines.

I watched Emilio reach over the counter, and take the plastic cover off a plate.

"'Elp yourself," he invited.

I could hardly believe my eyes. Once I could afford the best in Emilio Batti's restaurant. Now I am offered a lousy cheese sandwich !

"No," I refused, vehemently. "I'd rather starve."

The plastic cover slammed down over the sandwiches. I just managed to extract my fingers in time.

"You change your mind too late," said Emilio with a sly smile.

The dog !

One definition of a gentleman is that he merely raises his eyebrows where most people would raise the roof. I am, I think, above all else, and in the face of the most adverse circumstances, a gentleman. I elevated my eyebrows.

"You fat slob !" I said.

Someone tugged at my sleeve. It was Rosie, the waitress.

"A gentleman at the table over there wants to speak to you, Mr. Belov," she told me.

I looked over at the table she had indicated. An old fellow with bushy, grey hair, and the new, adjustable spectacles beckoned me. I'd never seen him before.

"My friend wishes to stand me a lunch," I said quickly.

"The special three-course, Rosie, with all the trimmings, followed by cherry pie."

I softened at the thought of it. I've said it before, and I'll say it again. If ever I wake in Heaven the first thing to greet me will be the aroma of Emilio Batti's cherry pie. No-one in the whole world can make cherry pie like Emilio. I went over to the table, and smiled encouragingly.

"You wanted to see me, sir ?" I asked.

I pulled a chair out and sat down. The old chap adjusted his spectacles and nodded.

"My name is Joshua Harris," he informed me. "I take it that you are Mr. Belov ?"

"The same," I said. Then an awful thought struck me.

"If you represent the Ferguson Mail Order Company," I

added, "I should like to point out that the goods I have been billed for were ordered in error. I returned them immediately. Perhaps they were lost in transit."

There were three pairs of shoes, an overcoat, and a plastic grandfather clock that spoke the hours. To tell the truth, friends, I ate them—in a manner of speaking. One has to live.

He shook his head.

"I don't represent any such firm," he said, testily. "I was told I'd find you here by a man named Meerschraft. He recommended you. He said you were just the man for the project I had in mind."

An angel of light, my friend Meerschraft, and a damn fine cyberneticist, too.

"Good," I said. "That was very discerning of him."

"Yes," went on the old chap. "He said that what I wanted was a trial and error Charlie with the bare minimum of knowledge. A rather curious and denigratory remark; but I assumed he was joking."

"Oh, he was, he was," I said, forcing a smile. "And what else did this greasy, overfed snake tell you? Did you offer *him* the job?"

What an insufferable toad Meerschraft is to be sure. He couldn't install a bell-push without a blue-print.

"He was otherwise engaged. Look, Mr. Belov, I have a proposition to make. You help me with this, er—project, and I'll cut you in as equal partner. There may be millions in it. On the other hand, if you prefer to remain independent I can offer you ten pounds as an immediate retainer."

"I'll take the ten pounds, Mr. Harris," I told him. "We can talk about the co-partnership later. I can assure you that you will never regret coming to me. I am, without question, the finest cyberneticist in the business. Tcha! Your troubles are practically over, my dear sir, whatever they may be."

He pulled out his wallet, and extracted two five pound notes.

"Just sign this receipt," he said, pushing a sheet of paper forward.

I signed with a flourish, and picked up the money. The floor shook, and a massive form appeared at my elbow. Before I could stuff the notes away a fat hand tore them from my grasp.

"Thank you, indeed," said Emilio, cheerfully. "Rosie !" he shouted, "what are you waiting for ? Bring this gentleman his order."

I am beginning to doubt the very existence of money. I never have it long enough to convince myself of its reality.

"Return those notes, Emilio," I demanded, fiercely, "or I'll throw myself on the floor after I've eaten, and scream for a stomach pump. I'll swear I've been poisoned."

He put his face close to mine.

"You will maybe not be acting," he said, darkly.

The unspeakable swine ! He put cayenne pepper in the cherry pie ! Any man who would do that would tar the Mona Lisa. It brought tears to my eyes, and they weren't all due to the pepper. He had ruined a work of art, the fat vandal ! I threw the pie on the floor in the end and wiped my feet on it. I swore I'd never eat in his filthy restaurant again ; but a fresh helping proved to be all right. I ate it because I have a very forgiving nature where cherry pie is concerned.

We took an air-taxi to sector ten, and walked across to North Side, where there were several disused warehouses.

"I rent the bottom floor of this rat-ridden hole here," said Joshua Harris, casually, and unlocked a rickety door in a grey, concrete structure that had once housed the products of a defunct brush company.

We went in, and he switched the lights on. It was a huge place, smelling of dust and neglect. In one corner were some bits of rusting machinery, and an old truck.

"We will soon have this to rights," I said. "It'll be turning out brushes by the million in a couple of days. I'm very familiar with this rig. You'll have to buy a computer, of course . . ."

"I'm not going into the brush business," he informed me coldly. "My equipment is over here."

I followed him to another corner of the place, and he pointed to a black circular object standing on insulated legs. It was about six feet in diameter, and about a foot deep. A cable ran from it to a plug inserted in a control box. There were some other bits of electronic equipment scattered about.

"That's it," he told me, a trifle sadly. "I just can't get it to work."

"Don't you worry, my friend," I assured him. "We'll have it ticking over beautifully in a couple of hours. Belov

has never known defeat." I walked round it, looking for a clue. "What is it?" I asked.

"It's my anti-gravitational lifting device," he said, proudly. "You might call it a gravitational shield. Theoretically, there is no reason why it shouldn't work ; but it doesn't."

"You surprise me," I said, and took a step towards the door. "Let me know when you have something easier on—like a perpetual motion machine, for instance."

I get the damndest jobs !

"Mr. Belov," he said, firmly, "I demand your assistance. You forget that I paid you ten pounds as a retaining fee, and that you signed a partnership deed. I shall be reluctant to take legal action, but . . ."

He paused, significantly.

"Partnership deed?" I echoed. "What partnership deed, you cranky old goat?"

"Didn't you read the document I gave you to sign?" he asked, adjusting his spectacles slightly, and peering at me, as though he could hardly believe that there stood before him a man who had signed something without reading it. "You should have done, you know. It was all in there. Perhaps I should explain that I have spent upwards of fifteen years on this project, and twenty-thousand pounds of someone else's money." He spread his hands in a gesture of frank avowal. "To put it in a nutshell, Mr. Belov, my backer will be here tomorrow for a showdown. I have told him that the grav-lift works ; but that I need a further ten-thousand pounds for essential modifications. The money's there, too, if I could get the thing to work. Otherwise, I—or rather we—stand a good chance of being thrown into gaol."

I am easily twisted. I am one of Nature's innocents. Friends, I don't know what kept me from strangling him. Instead I turned the other cheek, giving good for evil, as I so often do.

"Ten-thousand pounds," I said. "That's a lot of money. We mustn't give up. I may think of something, shortly. Don't forget, though, that you've had fifteen years of fiddling around with this electronic junk heap, and what have you achieved?"

"Three meals a day," he told me, "and a nice apartment in the city."

I looked at him with a new respect. In these hard times this was quite an achievement. The man was a genius.

"Allow me to shake you by the hand, sir," I requested, with some emotion, and pumped it vigorously. "Ten-thousand pounds, eh? Well, well!" I rubbed my hands together with some enthusiasm. "It's as good as ours. You can rely on old Belov to bring home the bacon."

"You think anti-grav is possible then?" he asked, with an air of surprise.

"No," I told him. "But for ten-thousand pounds your backer can have a time machine and a death-ray as well. It's just a matter of presentation."

"That sounds very much as though you are contemplating a fraud," he said, looking worried.

What an actor!

"Legerdemain, my friend, is hardly that," I smiled. "After all, what is truth, but illusion in depth. For the time being we will just trace the surface pattern, and show your backer the thumbprint of a miracle. He may deduce what he will. If people persist in asking for miracles they must expect water in their wine. Give me a cigarette."

"I don't smoke," he said. "It softens the brain, or so the experts say."

"They must be heavy smokers," I remarked, clicking my teeth together.

He crossed over to a steel locker, and opened a door. When he returned he had a sheaf of papers with him.

"There was a time," he said, tapping the papers, "when I really thought it could be done. But theory just didn't match up with practice, I'm afraid." He sighed. "Have a look through these papers, Mr. Belov. They contain all of my research work on the subject."

I glanced through them, and shuddered. Why do people have to confuse me? They were a maze of mathematical gibberish. Some of the symbols, like plus and minus, I recognised right away. I am not entirely without mathematical knowledge. But there were some I had never seen in my life before. I wondered vaguely if Einstein had been a non-smoker.

"I'm no figure fiend," I told him, handing the papers back. "I'm a practical man. You can take a fireman's axe to any computer you like to name, and I'll repair and re-wire it

blindfold, without so much as adding two and two together. That's a machine job, not a man's. I think in terms of solid circuitry, my friend. What the devil does all this mean in real language.?"

"Well," he began, "it is based to a large extent on Einstein's theory that the space in the neighbourhood of rotating masses acquires the special geometrical character which constitutes a gravitational field. He also says that gravitation and inertia are interchangeable terms. Now then, if you substitute pressure for inertia, and pressure field for gravitational field you will see right away that pressure of any kind creates a field of attraction. Let's tie this up with another point . . ."

"Let's," I agreed, recklessly. "After all, Einstein didn't know everything. It was just that Newton gave him the pip. Every time he went out it rained apples."

"The Earth's gravitational pull," went on Harris, ignoring me, "decreases in inverse proportion to the square root of the distance. Draw a circle as big as Jupiter around the Earth. At the periphery you are outside gravitational attraction; but fill that space with matter, and you'd just be a stain on the surface. This proves that gravity is intimately related to matter. Pressure increases at the centre, and there is an immediate all-over increase in gravity. Does that make sense to you?"

"No," I confessed. "But it makes sense to God, and I'm prepared to leave it at that."

"Anyway," he said, "to cut down on the explanations, I constructed a rotating pressure field, roving through three dimensions. It took me over two years of hard work; but I accomplished it in the end."

"Marvellous," I said, without having the faintest idea of what he was talking about. "What happened?"

"Nothing at all, oddly enough. So I tried a new approach to the problem. I devised a system of electro-magnetic gyroscopes, each of which accelerated, and decelerated individually, and never at the same speed as any of the others. The speed pattern was broken up at intervals by a random selector. Only the magnetic fields interacted."

The man was mad!

"I can see your line of reasoning," I said. "There is a clarity about it that actually hurts like having a leg off. Tell me the worst."

"It exploded, and I spent six months in hospital. My latest attempt is purely electronic . . ."

"Spare me the horrid details," I implored. "If you ever discovered anything of value it would be purely fortuitous, my friend. I believe I'd feel safer if you weren't here. Yes, I'm certain I would."

"Now look," he protested. "I really must explain about this latest . . ."

I led him gently, but firmly to the door.

"Goodbye, Mr. Harris," I said. "Come back tomorrow with your financial backer. You haven't a thing to worry about. Belov is in charge."

"Wait till you meet Jim Barrett," he said. "You might change your mind. His father is my backer. He's afraid of the old fellow frittering away his fortune, and leaving him out in the cold when he dies. He wants my head for a door-stop."

"You'd never miss it," I told him. "Goodbye, Mr. Harris."

I pushed him out, and shut the door. Then I made a tiny cigarette from a morsel of tobacco and pocket fluff, and tried to smoke it while I considered the problem. What was wanted was the Indian rope trick without the rope. After a while it occurred to me that a genuine solution to the anti-grav project might be easier. Such thoughts are dangerous ; but honestly will break through.

I went to the door to clear my head, and someone almost fell in ear first when I opened it. He was a youngish man, dark-featured and with bristling black hair. His face bore the deep furrows of a permanent scowl. He must have been all of six-feet six, and built in proportion.

"Ah !" he said, when he had recovered his composure. "So we have another dependent, have we ?"

I took time out to think about this odd remark, while he marched over to Harris's latest folly, and kicked it.

"What's this ?" he inquired. "And where's that fraud Harris ?"

I am not given to bandying words with giants ; but there is a certain dignity to be maintained in human relations. I picked up a handy copper bar that was lying around, and went over to him.

"He's dead," I said, "and that's his latest invention. He willed it to me. It mass-produces doughnuts at the rate of

ten-thousand an hour, and plays the National Anthem in six-eight time. It is what the world has been waiting for, my friend. Would you like me to put your name on our order list?"

"Cut the foo-talk," he said. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," I said, truthfully. "Who are you?"

"Jim Barrett," he informed me. "My father has twenty-thousand pounds sunk in this lunatic project. I suppose Harris engaged you to rig something spurious but spectacular? Well, this time he's got me to reckon with."

"My dear sir," I protested, "you've got it all wrong. Harris is an honest craftsman, and a great genius. Tomorrow you will see that circular platform rise into the air, and remain there unsupported."

"Let's have a preview," he snarled.

"There are certain adjustments which have to be made, and they may take several hours."

He surprised me by pulling an automatic from an inside pocket.

"Drop that bar," he ordered, "and make your adjustments now. I'll give you ten minutes to complete the job, and then you are going to switch on."

For such a huge fellow to have a gun as well was, to my mind, a case of piling Pelion on Ossa. It was disgusting. I cursed Harris wherever he might be, and switched the equipment on. Nothing happened.

"You see," I said. "These adjustments really are necessary. Can't you come back tomorrow?"

"Eight-and-a-half minutes," he said, evenly. "And then I'm going to punch a hole in your fat head."

Another madman! I am pestered by them!

I opened a servicing flap on the side of the thing, and tried to trace the maze of wiring to see if I could divine its purpose; but the gun worried me. Finally, I pulled a whole bunch of wires loose, and earthed them. I thought perhaps he might be satisfied with a few fireworks. When I switched on again there was a vivid, blue flash, and the thing went up in the air about eighteen inches, *and stayed there.*

His jaw dropped.

"Absolutely no deception," I said, quickly, "and all my own work, I swear it. Harris is a fool, a charlatan. This is entirely my own invention. Remember the name—Hek

Belov. And take my hand on it. You won't be able to get near me tomorrow for reporters."

I walked over to him still talking, and took the gun from his nerveless grasp.

"Now," I said, pointing the weapon a little to the left of him in case it went off, "you can get out."

Without a word he turned and stumbled out into the street. I closed the door, and turned around in time to see a giant-sized rat hurdle a rusting transformer, and flash past me at a tremendous lick. But I have a good eye. I whipped up the automatic, and took a drop shot at the beast. A ready-lit cigarette popped out of the end of the barrel. What *will* they think of next?

It was getting rather late, and I decided it was time I went home. Besides, I was hungry, and I can't think on an empty stomach. Tomorrow, I promised myself, I would sort out the anti-grav platform, and get the whole thing down on paper. Just now I had to eat. It was too late for Emilio's so I would have to see what could be wheedled out of the staff at Emma Stack's ancient boarding house. Getting in is the hard part. Lately, I have been using the fire escape in preference to the front door, where my grasping landlady is always ready to pounce on me.

I removed my shoes, and crept up the iron stairs with extreme caution; but as I reached the first floor a window was flung open, and a voice said: "Good evening, Mr. Belov."

"Good evening, Mrs. Stacks," I returned, politely. "A little exercise did no-one any harm, eh, dear lady? I was getting fat with continually using the lift."

"And continually eating my food," she observed, acidly, her sharp features contorting with anger. "Now look here, Mr. Belov, you owe me for three week's board and lodging. When do you propose to pay me?"

"Tomorrow for certain, my dear Mrs. Stacks," I assured her. "Tomorrow I will pay you double, and you can go out, and get drunk at old Belov's expense, or whatever it is that you filthy rich do with our hard-earned money. I bid you a very good evening."

I started off up the stairs again, and then stopped to listen. There was a scurry of feet, and the bang of a door. Emma Stacks was on her way. She had a good chance of beating me to it, being more sparely built. She would almost certainly

be waiting for me in my room. A very determined woman, my landlady.

I went back, climbed through the window, and climbed out again quick. Rodney, her black alsatian was there. A vicious beast. He set up a tremendous barking, and would have been after me if I had not slammed the window shut. I hate deception ; but there was no other course open to me now. So I enlarged a tiny nail tear in my left trouser leg, and holding my hand over it limped up the iron stairs, and climbed painfully over the window-sill into my room.

She was there all right ; but the threatened storm didn't break.

"What's wrong with your leg, Mr. Belov?" she asked, uneasily.

"It's nothing, dear lady," I said, grimacing, and letting her see the tear. "I don't wish to make a fuss. The authorities might want to destroy the poor animal. If you would be so kind as to leave the room I'll attend to it. There's absolutely nothing to worry about." I limped across to the door, and opened it. "I just hope I don't get hydrophobia, that's all."

She mumbled some sort of apology, and then she left. I closed the door gently, and danced across to the bed, where I bounced about joyfully for a few minutes. I was safe for another week. Presently, with some confidence I dialled the kitchen, and asked for supper. It arrived on three plates. For the time being I was a star boarder.

Joshua Harris was delighted with the apparent success of the anti-grav device.

"What was the modification you made, Mr. Belov?" he asked, with a happy smile. "You'll get full credit for your efforts, of course ; but it must be understood that any patent rights will be under my name. I'll get the circuit diagram, and working drawings, and you can indicate just what you did."

I told him what I did. I showed him the wrenched out hook-up, the twisted wires, some of them open circuit, and others haphazardly earthed. He broke down, and cried. When he had recovered his composure again he said :

"I've been working on this problem for upwards of twenty years. This particular model took me two years to build. Then you come along, and tear the guts out of it with scarcely

a thought. You don't even know what you've done ; but it works for you, and that's what hurts."

"There is positively no justice, my friend," I told him gently. "Didn't you know?"

"I know now," he said, disgustedly. "Let's see if we can make some sort of sense out of your—" he swallowed painfully, "—your modification."

"Let's wait until we've landed the ten-thousand pounds," I urged. "It's working isn't it? Leave well alone for the time being."

"All right," he said, grudgingly. "But I don't think I will ever be able to forgive you."

Walter Barrett, who had made his money in fish-meal, was a tall, distinguished looking man, with a slight stoop. He was nudging eighty, and looked rather frail ; but determined. His son was with him. He looked sullen, and suspicious.

"Well, Harris, what have you got to show me?" asked the old fellow, breezily. "It had better be good. I've sunk a lot of money into this enterprise. Is that the thing there?"

"Yes," I said. "And in another twelve months it will be all ready for the production belt ; but it will take half-a-million pounds to put it there."

"Who is this fellow, Harris?" he asked testily.

His son whispered to him.

"Oh, so you are the inventor, Mr., er—what's-ye-name? I thought Harris here . . ."

"Nothing of the kind," said Harris, indignantly. "He's just my assistant. Isn't that so, Belov?"

"Your partner," I corrected. "As to who invented the putrid thing, well—I will not be provoked into argument."

I went over to the power control box, and switched on. The circular platform rose about two feet. Jim Barret took his father's stick, and swept it under, and over the humming, black circle.

"Seems genuine," he said, grudgingly.

"Take it up a bit more," said his father. "Take it up to the ceiling."

Harris shook his head.

"The lead's too short," he explained. "I intend to install a separate power unit ; but that will take quite a deal of money, what with re-designing, and so forth."

"Yes, yes, I know," said the old fellow, impatiently. "We'll see about that later ; but you have some slack there," he persisted. "Take it up as far as you can."

Harris looked at me, an unformed question in his eyes. Would it go any higher ?

"I'll increase the voltage," I said. "That should do it."

I pushed the power control handle right over. The anti-grav platform became a blur of movement. There were eight distinct bangs, and a heap of rubble, and bits of furniture and machinery shot down from seven floors, and piled up in a heap in front of us. We jumped in all directions. Then we were looking up at a hole in the ceiling, and further diminishing holes all the way to the roof. The Belov-Harris grav-shield had gone.

Jim Barrett was the first to speak.

"What happened ?" he asked.

His father didn't know either ; but he was quite certain about one thing.

"You'll never get another penny of my money, Harris," he said, quivering with rage. "You and your damn-fool experiments ! You might have killed us."

His son smiled for the first time.

"Come on, dad," he said. "Let's get out of here. It takes a lunatic to bring a man to his senses," he added, pointedly, "and you've certainly got one there, Harris."

Harris, with one eye on me, seemed to be selecting a piece of concrete. You know, friends, there is a time to go, and a time to stay. Sometimes survival depends on a quick decision. It was unthinkable that my unique brains should be scattered on the dirty floor of a disused warehouse by a crazed moron. I made the door three yards ahead of him. His language was dreadful, and the lump of reinforced concrete, like a jagged sputnik, with rusty antennae, crashed into the wall about a foot from my head.

The midday newscasts reported that a mysterious object, apparently from outer space, swooped over Progress Square, and decapitated the statue of John Heathcott Travis, the founder of Muffled Wheat Inc., and the greatest benefactor of our age. He it was who took the *pop* !—*crackle* !—*bang* ! out of the national breakfast, and saved the sanity of millions. I always raise my hat to old Travis. He was once heard to

remark of his own product—*Sweetie-Weet*—that he never ate the filthy stuff. He died of a surfeit of stout and oysters.

I met Harris about a month later in Emilio's. He looked fairly prosperous, and seemed to bear me no ill-will.

"The project's off," he told me, spreading the specially-obtained caviare on his toast; "but the publicity was a god-send. Manning-Welstroke, the electric lift people, are paying me twenty-thousand pounds to discontinue my experiments. They got the breeze-up, seemingly. So the living's easy again. Below, you must let me buy you some lunch."

It was the least I expected.

"Thank you," I said, and sat down.

Harris extended a confident flipper towards Rosie. She came over at once, helped by a discreet push from Emilio. My rich friend smiled, benignly. I decided he was good for at least a porterhouse steak followed by two helpings of cherry pie. There might even be some wine . . .

"Rosie," said Harris, "Mr. Below would like a cheese sandwich, and a cup of coffee."

At an adjacent table a gentleman with a heavy moustache was happily slurping through a plate of tomato soup. I took it off him, and emptied it over Harris's head.

"Goodbye!" I said. "You capitalist swine!"

I removed the toast from his fingers, and ate it on the way to the door.

One has to live.

—Edward Mackin

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RETURN VISIT

By E. C. TUBB

"You know," said the demon conversationally, "things have changed quite a bit since the old days."

"They have?" Despite the pounding of his heart and an unusual shortness of breath Cris managed to appear as nonchalant as he intended. "Do tell," he urged, and settling back in his chair lit a cigarette with fingers laudably steady. Which, all things considered, was a feat equal to his star performance. The demon seemed appreciative.

"You're a cool one," he said admiringly. "You don't seem a bit scared."

"Why should I be scared?" Cris blew a careful smoke ring towards the pentagram he had chalked on his neutral coloured Wilton. "You are the product of a carefully conducted scientific experiment and there is no more reason for me to be afraid of you than there would be for me to be scared of a bacteriological culture I may have bred on an agar plate. Had you not appeared when summoned I would have been disappointed; why should I be terrified because my experiment was a success?"

It sounded logical enough and it would have been nice had it been wholly true, but it wasn't and for a variety of reasons. A nice, normal, twentieth century man just doesn't conduct experiments, scientific or otherwise, calling for chalk marks scrawled on the carpet, braziers burning a redolent mixture of exotic herbs, assorted entrails and gooey internal liquids of freshly defunct organisms. Still more, they don't conduct such experiments to the accompaniment of mystic gestures, symbolic sacrifices and memorised chants in a tongue-twisting language. And if they do, just for the curiosity of it, maybe, or because they are bored enough or desperate enough to try anything once, and the experiment succeeds, then a little perturbation is to be excused.

Cris Neville was more than a little perturbed.; he was scared from his scalp to his toe-nails. Sternly he reminded himself that there was absolutely no reason for fear. So what if his bidden guest did happen to look like a badly drawn impression of some Medieval artist's conception of an attendant of the lower regions? He couldn't help the way he looked could he? And his opening conversational gambit had shown promise.

"It's all a matter of logic," said Cris. "Logic and a scientific mind. After all, I expected you; that's what all the ceremony was for." He inhaled again, letting smoke stream from his nostrils. The demon stared in frank admiration.

"Aren't you afraid of burning yourself?"

"With this?" Cris took the cigarette from his mouth and examined it. "No, why should I?" He chuckled at the demon's expression. "Of course! Tobacco smoking is comparatively recent, you wouldn't have known about it." He shook a cigarette from his pack, lit it and tossed it into the pentagram. "Try it for yourself."

Dubiously the demon picked up the little white cylinder and stuck it in his mouth. Bravely he puffed; the results, to Cris, were educational.

"Did you have to do that?" The demon went into a fresh spasm of coughing, waving a petulant talon before his face. His scaly hide was already greenish but his red-rimmed eyes watered in a familiar way. Cris felt almost sorry for him.

"Take it easy," he advised. "Don't inhale to begin with, you'll soon get used to it."

"Maybe." The demon puffed again, more cautiously this time. "Seems senseless to me, breathing in a lot of smoke and fouling up your lungs." He took a third puff. "Not too bad when you get used to it though." He tried inhaling, held his breath, then grinned. "I see what you mean. You should have warned me, though."

"Sorry," Cris registered his surprise. "I just didn't think that smoke would have bothered you."

"That's the trouble with this business," snapped the demon. "No thought for others at all. There I was, just minding my own business when I get snatched away without as much as a by-your-leave and when I arrive after a bitch of a journey, what happens? Nowhere to sit, nothing to eat or drink, no courtesy, no consideration of my feelings at all." He sniffed and stared around the apartment. "Still, as I said, things have certainly changed since the last time I was here."

"So you said," reminded Cris. "Twice."

"So I have," chuckled the demon. He squatted on the carpet and looked regretfully at the butt of his cigarette. "Got any more of these things?"

"Help yourself." Cris tossed the package into the pentagram. "You have to set fire to one end then suck the other. Want me to light it for you?"

"I can manage," said the demon. He held the cigarette in one talon, squinted down his nose and suddenly sent a tongue of flame spurting from between his lips. "Bet that surprised you," he said cheerfully from behind a cloud of tobacco smoke.

"Why should it?" lied Cris. Desperately he sought to retain his nonchalance. "I'd say that it was due to a simple matter of your metabolism. You probably generate free hydrogen in your stomach and have a deposit of spongy platinum in your mouth. When you belch the catalytic action of the platinum sets the hydrogen alight." He shrugged. "Simple."

"Clever, aren't you," sneered the demon, he appeared crestfallen.

"Just logical," corrected Cris easily. "I've a scientific mind, remember, I'm not like the old timers you may have met."

"You can say that again," said the demon. "Things have certainly changed. The way you're dressed for one thing, no robes covered with all those odd designs which used to be so

fashionable, though I don't know why, horrible taste I always thought." The demon puffed at his dwindling cigarette. "And you haven't got all that unhygienic fuzz hanging down your chest. Lots of other little things. You've certainly changed, all right."

"We're not talking about me," reminded Cris impatiently. "We're talking about things."

"Well?" The demon seemed surprised. "Same thing, isn't it?"

"No," snapped Cris, he was beginning to feel annoyed. "It isn't the same at all. I'm a man, not a thing."

"Wrong," corrected the demon patiently. "I'm a man, you're a thing."

Logic, as Cris was beginning to find out, had its drawbacks.

The demon was right, of course, logically at least. To Cris he was a thing, but to himself he was a man while Cris was the thing. It was a point about which the early demonologists had probably ruptured blood vessels but Cris was a modern man and could look at both sides of a problem. And it wasn't important, not really. If the demon wanted to think of him as a thing then that was all right by Cris—provided the demon brought home the bacon.

The bacon, of course, being that which would enable Cris to live the sort of life to which he wanted to become accustomed.

Cris wasn't naturally greedy, not more than normal, that is, but when a man is given the opportunity of getting everything and anything he wants then he can't refuse. If he could then he wouldn't be a man; he'd be a Saint. And a Saint, by definition, wouldn't be sitting in a modern, self-service apartment chatting conversationally to a real, live demon.

Cris didn't let the involved logic confuse him. He'd lost his initial fear of his guest; the demon, on closer acquaintance, seemed somewhat dumb, little better than an intelligent moron, certainly no match for a sharp-witted product of the twentieth century commercial rat race. Striking a bargain with the demon seemed, to Cris, to be about equal to the difficulty of stealing candy from a one-day old baby. But even so he proceeded with due caution.

"It is true, isn't it, that you cannot possibly escape from the pentagram while it remains intact?" The ancient parchment had said so but Cris wanted to be sure.

"That's right." The fact didn't seem to worry the demon. "Now don't you get any bright ideas about breaking it," he warned. "If you do then I'll come after you, snatch you up and fling you into an eternal furnace."

"Bunk," said Cris. "Who are you trying to scare?"

"You don't believe me?" The demon seemed abashed. "But it's true, I know it is."

"How do you know?" Cris rose and stepped towards the chalked circle. "I've been thinking about this and I've a notion all this snatching away business is just plain propaganda. Let's just break the pentagram and find out, shall we?"

"Don't do that!" The demon seemed really upset. "Please! If you do then you'll . . ."

"I'll kill you?" Cris nodded, satisfied. "I thought so. The old timers were too scared to be able to think straight. They called you up and then sweated blood thinking up ways and means to control you. It should have been obvious, even to them, that you were more afraid of them than they were of you."

"That isn't so," protested the demon. "Some of them were practically petrified. Why, I remember one old man, Nostradamus, I think his name was, who almost threw a fit when he saw me." Talons gleamed in the electric lights. "I was treated with respect in those days."

"That's finished with," snapped Cris. "I'm your boss and don't you forget it. One peep out of you and I'll break the pentagram and let you suffer." He resumed his chair, feeling a warm, inner glow of satisfaction. It was one thing to think that you were right but quite another to *know* that you were. Cris knew that he had the demon by the short hairs, if he'd had short hairs to have him by, that is.

"Smart guy," sneered the demon, but he was beaten and he knew it. "Well, let's get on with it. What do you want and what do you offer for it?"

"Not so fast," said Cris, he had no intention of being rushed. "Let's swap a little information first. Want anything to eat, drink?"

"I could use some more tobacco," confessed the demon.

Cris dug out a box of cigars he'd been given for a Christmas present and never used. "Try these, they'll last longer." He found a bottle of Scotch he'd been saving for an emergency.

He'd been saving it all of a week now and an emergency was due any time. He opened it, took a nip and felt the demon's eyes staring at him. "Try some of this." Cris filled a tumbler with the golden spirit. "Stoke up your fires a bit. Here." He placed it together with the cigars just within the pentagram. His skin burned a little as he withdrew his hand.

"Thanks," said the demon, he seemed mollified by Cris's desire to please. A warty protuberance lifted over one eye as he tasted the Scotch. "This stuff comparatively recent too?"

"You could say that," admitted Cris. He glanced down at his hand, the one he'd placed within the pentagram, the skin was red and sore looking as if it had been exposed to a mild acid. "Force field," he said thoughtfully. "I should have guessed."

"Uh?" The demon blinked over an empty glass. "You said something?"

"Just thinking," said Cris. He didn't want to give anything away and what the demon didn't know couldn't hurt him. It was obvious now what all that mumbo-jumbo the spells, the smoke and chanting had all been for. It was science all right, but of rather a peculiar kind. Sounds, vibrations rather, coupled with guided mental force and the use of unsuspected chemicals in unsuspected ways. Add them all together, stare at in the light of relationship symbols rather than actual material reactions, stir in a little of the new, barely suspected sciences of parapsychology and multi-dimensional frames of existence and the demon was solely the product of natural forces.

"A big game hunter," said Cris, "that's what I am. Sending out my traps and snaring a demon from a co-existing world. Whisk him back here trapped in an intangible force field controlled by the pentagram. Break the pentagram and woof! Demon is exposed to an alien environment. Demon can't live in an alien environment so demon dies. Simple." He took another drink.

"Simple," echoed the demon. Cris stared at him with a sudden suspicion that the creature could read his mind. Hastily he put it to the test.

"If it's so simple then perhaps you can tell me how it is we can understand each other?" Grimly Cris concentrated on the multiplication tables.

"Something to do with the pentagram, I guess," said the demon. "All I know is that I'm talking normally and that you sound to me like me." He blinked and ran a forked tongue over his lipless mouth. "Some drink you've got here. More?"

"Sure." Cris looked at the Scotch, hesitated, then dug out a bottle of cooking rum some transient friend had once passed off on him at a bottle party. He detested rum, even good rum, and this stuff was strictly for charity. He tossed the bottle towards his guest. "Help yourself."

Watching the demon attack the contents of the bottle made Cris more conscious of his power than before. Obviously the demon couldn't read minds; Cris hadn't even suspected that the pentagram force field could also act as a translating device and the communication problem had worried him a little. The ancients, whoever they had been, had certainly stumbled on something when they had devised the demon-calling ritual. Properly investigated and handled it could even solve the problem of interstellar flight. A shuffling from within the chalk marks brought Cris back to the business at hand.

The demon swayed a little as he sat on the carpet, the empty bottle clutched in one taloned claw. A discarded cigar had burned a hole in the Wilton and a little pool of sweat had trickled down from the scaled forehead and collected on the rug. In the battle between the demons Rum had obviously won.

"Well," snapped the demon pettishly. "What are we waiting for? How about getting on with the business and letting me go home?"

It was, Cris thought, a good idea.

There were preliminaries. Aspirin, Alka Seltzer, bicarbonate, strong black coffee, a hair of the dog which had bitten and a couple of ice bags filled with cubes from the refrigerator. The force field seemed to be able to translate all these things to suit an alien metabolism; at least, the demon took them all, sullenly, but taking them just the same. While his guest muttered and cursed to himself Cris concentrated on making the most of his opportunity.

"I want," he said when he thought that his guest was fit enough to sit up and take notice, "I want eternal youth, eternal health, eternal handsomeness and a charmed life."

"Who doesn't?" snapped the demon. "Act your age, buster, get sensible."

"Forgetting something?" Cris reached for a wet rag. "One wipe of this and you'll be food for worms."

"You think that worries me?" The demon nursed his brow. "Go ahead, let's get it over and done with."

Nonplussed Cris dropped the wet rag. Threats having failed he tried logic.

"Look," he reminded. "I'm your boss, whatever I say you have to do. Right?"

"Wrong." Wearily the demon raised his head, the light seemed to hurt his eyes and he groaned, lifting his claw to shield them. "It was never like this in the old days," he mourned. "Lantern light or a couple of torches was all they had then, and no one ever tried to poison me."

"You've got a hangover," said Cris impatiently. "I've had lots of them in my time, it'll pass."

"You mean that you've lived through this more than once?" The demon seemed startled. "How much punishment can a thing like you take?"

"Keep to the point," said Cris. "Why was I wrong when I said that whatever I asked you had to do?"

"No compulsion," said the demon. "Oh, you can threaten to break the pentagram, sure, but the way I feel now that's no threat." He brooded for a moment. "Now that's another thing which never happened before. The last thing those old timers wanted to do was to break the pentagram." He sighed. "Of course, I'd have ripped them open before handing in my chips, the same as I would you, but where's the profit in that?"

"None at all," said Cris swiftly. He swallowed, he hadn't thought of the natural consequences of loosing the demon. He forced himself to smile. "Let's not talk about unpleasant things like that," he urged. "Let's be friendly."

"Let's," agreed the demon. "How about letting me go home?"

"Later." Cris narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "You can't leave here until I give the word, can you?" He didn't need the demon's sullen nod to verify his suspicions. "Well,

there's your compulsion. Unless you obey me then I'll keep you here until you starve."

"That'll take a long time," reminded the demon. "I've a longer life span than you things and the field will collapse when you die or when you forget to remember to maintain it." He settled back on the Wilton. "I can wait."

Defeated, Cris glared at his guest. This was getting more complicated than he liked and he had the uneasy feeling that things were getting beyond control. Whether the demon knew anything about the necessity of sleep, Cris didn't know, but if the field were to collapse if he forgot to remember to maintain it, then its effectiveness was limited by the time he could stay awake. Like it or not he had to appeal for guidance.

"All right," he said. "So we'll leave out the question of compulsion. How else do I make you obey me?"

"You can't," said the demon. He grew thoughtful. "Of course, there's always incentive, you know, something for something."

"A trade?" Cris nodded, he had expected it, the old legends were full of tales of demon-callers who'd been outsmarted or who had outsmarted their guests. He relaxed a little, with his training it shouldn't be hard to get the better of any deal they might cook up.

"Right," he said. "I'll make a deal with you. You give me eternal youth coupled with eternal health and . . ."

"Take it easy." The demon began to show interest for the first time since business was discussed. "Let's be reasonable about this. I can't give you eternal anything, no one can. I'm limited, you know."

"You are?" Cris managed to control his disappointment. It was logical, he supposed, if the demon had unlimited powers he wouldn't have remained here in the first place. "A pity, about your limitations, I mean. Well, what can you give, offer rather?"

"Quite a lot." The demon hunched himself into a more comfortable position. "Women, for example, how about that?" Incredibly he became lecherous. "I can swap you a brew which will make any woman ready to fall into your arms at first sight."

"You can?" Cris controlled his amusement. "Where is it?"

"You'll have to make it up," said the demon. "But that isn't hard. Just take a few little insects and dry them in the sun. Then powder them and mix the powder with . . ."

"I'm not interested in your aphrodisiacs," interrupted Cris. "Anyway, I know all about that stuff as it is." He sneered. "Is that the best you can offer?"

"You name it, I've got it," said the demon. He appeared to be getting restless. "Come on, buster, let's quit playing around. What do you want and what do you offer?"

He sounded like a pedlar in a street market.

Respect is usually founded on ignorance ; the less you know of a thing the more you tend to respect it. In the old days demonologists held what they summoned in the profoundest respect and fear. They knew nothing of the natural laws governing what they did and believed implicitly in magical powers. Cris knew better and he was disappointed.

The aphrodisiac, for example. Probably some old-timer must have felt it the answer to his every prayer. A pinch of powder and youthful virility would be restored ; ergo, the demon had granted the promised youth. Another pinch slipped in a cup of wine and the wench of his choice would be willing to fall into his arms. Naturally, he'd know nothing of the chemistry involved and, any later failures due to the wearing off of the dose would be attributed to Heavenly intervention ; a just punishment for bargaining with the Powers of Darkness. But, at the time, he would have been convinced that his youth had been restored or that magic had solved the problems of his heart. Cris wondered just how much of a demon's so-called power were in the same class.

"Money," he said, getting to the root of the matter. "How about getting me a nice big, sackful of moola?"

"Moola?" The demon frowned, colloquialisms, apparently, didn't translate too well.

"Sure," said Cris. "You know, lettuce, spending stuff, coin, cash."

"Gold," said the demon brightly. "Now I'm with you. You want to know how to make gold?"

"I know how to make gold," said Cris. "The trouble is that you need a roomful of equipment, enough power to light a city and when you've made it it costs more than the natural article." He took a bill from his wallet. "Not gold, this

stuff. Can you supply me a vanload or two? And make sure that all the numbers are different," he added hastily. "I don't want to get into trouble over this."

Sombrely the demon stared at the note Cris had tossed into the pentagram, holding it up to the light and studying the fine engraving. Finally he threw it back and slumped on the carpet.

"Sorry, I can't do that."

"Why not?" Cris recovered the bill. He was getting tired and irritable, as a worker of marvels this particular demon seemed to be way down in the bottom grade. "Suppose you tell me what you can do, this is getting us nowhere fast."

"Then suppose you let me go home?"

"Not until I'm ready." Cris glared at his guest; his natural frustration mounting into an active dislike of the thing he had called into his presence. "You're supposed to be a demon with extensive powers of granting the wishes of the person who has summoned you. Hell, the old books are full of propaganda about how good you are. Well, I've summoned you and here you are. And what's happened? You've got drunk at my expense, ruined my carpet with your cigar butts and all we've done is to swap a lot of chit chat. As a demon you're strictly for the birds!"

"Now take it easy, buster!" The demon blinked red eyes; he seemed to be annoyed. "I didn't ask to come here, don't forget, and now that I'm here you'll have to put up with what you've got. What the hell did you expect, anyway? I'm just a normal man, not a miracle worker. The trouble with you things is that you expect too much. Not," he added with pride, "that I've ever failed before. Nostradamus had nothing to kick about, he wanted to know how to make gold and I told him. Same with Paracelsus and a character named Bacon. Same with twenty-dozen others. They asked and I answered. How to restore youth; how to make a sure-fire love philtre; how to make gold; how to master the elements; they asked and I answered. What more do you want?"

"The stuff itself," snapped Cris. "You probably fed those old timers a load of formulae and left them to it. The love philtres worked, sure they did, but did anyone ever manage to make gold? Like hell they did. You may have told them how but they lacked the technology to do it."

Cris waved the bill he'd taken from his wallet. "Now why can't you deliver me a ton of this stuff?"

"Because I'm human," snapped the demon. "You think I usually walk around naked?" He glared down at his scaly hide. "When you whipped me into this trap I left everything behind. All I can do is to give you the benefit of my knowledge. Hell, to copy those things would need a complete printing shop, a photographic works and a couple of skilled engravers. Then you need the right paper, ink and the rest of it. I can tell you how to do it, sure, but I can't do it for you."

"I know how to do it," snapped Cris peevishly. "I'm not dumb." He paused, thinking things over. It was logical, of course, and that seemed to be the trouble with this demon-summoning racket. Obviously the demon couldn't just wave a claw and deliver the goods; Genii could, perhaps, but this character was no Genii. What he could do was to give information and, assuming that his own world was in advance of the earth, that could be important. Correction; had been important. With the strides made lately the chances were high that the demon's home world was way behind earth's technology. Cris felt that he was in the position of a trader trying to make a deal with a tribe of aborigines—nothing they could tell him could be better than what he already knew.

Which was probably why demonologists had long since faded from the scheme of things.

"You know," said Cris wearily, "you demons are an overrated race. Squares, Peasants. Has-beens, no less."

The demon didn't answer. He slumped, apparently half-asleep in the centre of the pentagram. Cris couldn't really blame his lack of attention. For the past several hours he had been swapping information with his guest in a desperate attempt to salvage something from the ruins of his great scheme. What had come out was educational if not financially promising. His guess about the relative technologies had been correct. A physicist, for example, would have been very interested in the demon's method of making gold but, basically, it was no different from atomic transmutation.

Cris had the idea that things had altered to such a pitch that he was able to give more than he could hope to receive. Being human he boasted a little, nothing extravagant, but enough to startle the demon into a new respect.

"You don't need me," pleaded the demon. "How about calling it a day and letting me go home?"

"No." Cris was stubborn. He ran his eye down the list of items he had extracted from the demon, wondering which to plump for. None of them was extraordinary, but a couple were promising. "What's this 'Eternal Youthful Beauty for Ladies of the Court'?" he said. Cosmetics were always a good line. The demon twitched.

"Hormone cream," he said sullenly. "You know about hormones?"

"Yes." Cris ran a pencil through the item. "How about this 'Controlling of the Elements'?"

"Carry an umbrella," sighed the demon. "Keeps you dry when it's wet and cool when it's hot."

"And I suppose the rest of it can be classified under air conditioning." Cris crossed off more items. "We know about 'Eternal Youthfulness for Gentlemen of the Court,' don't we?" He didn't trouble to hide his sneer. For some reason the demon grew annoyed.

"That's what you think," he snapped. "It wasn't enough just to give them virility, remember, I had to really work on that one."

"Oh?" Cris looked up, his pencil poised over the paper. The demon nodded.

"Some of those old timers were in a bad way. I had to give them a vitamin-rich diet and tell them how to grow some more fuzz on their faces. By the time I was through they were more than satisfied."

"They were?" A tingle ran down Cris's spine. "You told them how to grow hair?" He forced himself to be casual.

"That's right." The demon preened himself. "You just take a little . . ." He broke off, a crafty light in his eye. "Trade?"

"Why not?" Cris shrugged attempting to be off-hand. "It's getting late and I guess you want to get off home. Tell you what I'll do, you give me the formula to grow hair and I'll trade you my soul."

"Your what?" The demon reared up on his lower limbs.

"My soul." Cris swallowed, he didn't care for the way the demon was showing his talons. "It's the usual thing, isn't it?"

"Is it?" The demon clicked his teeth. "How about showing me this 'soul' of yours?"

"I can't. It's the hidden part of me, the real me, and when I'm dead you can take it for your own." Cris forced himself to smile. "Incidentally, it's my most precious possession."

"So Faust told me," snarled the demon. "I let him sweet-talk me into trading twenty-years of subjective time for his 'soul'." He paced the confines of the pentagram. "When I think of how that character rooked me! I slaved over him, had him under controlled hypnosis for a week and gave him everything he wanted. And for what?"

"You mean that he didn't have a soul?"

"If he did I didn't get it." The demon shook his head. "From his build-up I figured that it was something special. He seemed to think so, anyway. So I gave him twenty years of subjective high-living, worked myself to a shadow doing it too, and all for nothing." The demon brooded for a moment. "Tell you what. You give me the spell formula and I'll make the trade. Is it a deal?"

"What do you want the ritual for?" Cris was cautious. "Haven't you one of your own?"

"That's beside the point," snapped the demon. "I'm sick of being whipped into this world at the whim of every character who wants something for nothing. You give me the papers and I'll give you the hair restoring formula." He folded his arms. "And that's my last word. Make the deal or I'll clam up until you send me home."

Cris pondered for a while and then shrugged. It wouldn't hurt to give the demon what he wanted, he'd had photostats made of the parchment anyway, and he could always re-summon the demon if he wanted. And the hair restorer would be a gold mine.

"O.K.," he said. "I'll get the parchments while you write down the stuff I'll need to grow hair." He tossed pencil and paper into the pentagram and went to find the parchments. On the way back from his desk he switched on the radio, turning up the volume as far as it would go. He wasn't sure but he had the notion that there would be noise when the demon returned to his own world. Air-displacement would cause it if nothing else and he didn't want any snoopy neighbours coming in and seeing the mess.

"Finished?" He held out his hand for the formula.

"Just about." The demon seemed fascinated by the radio. "How ever did you find musicians small enough to fit into that box?"

"Made them," said Cris flippantly.

"Made them?" The demon blinked. "You mean that you took ordinary people and made them small enough to get inside that box?" He shook his head in baffled amazement.

"Sure," said Cris. He felt a contemptuous amusement. "Don't you have radio back home?"

"No." The demon looked envious. "I suppose . . .?"

"We've made our bargain," said Cris swiftly, he didn't want his joke to backfire. "Have you finished writing out that formula yet?"

"Just finished." The demon tossed out the paper and pencil. "I've done the best I can with the terms I know. You shouldn't have any trouble getting them, the old timers never seemed to complain." He snapped his talons. "The parchment, please."

"Just a minute." Cris scanned the paper. The list of ingredients was ridiculously short, he supposed that much depended on using the right proportions. In any event it should be a simple matter for any proficient chemist to refine, strain and even synthesis the formula. He glanced up from his reading. "Are you certain that this stuff will grow hair?"

"On an egg," assured the demon. He seemed impatient. "Look, buster, just for your information I don't lie. In fact I don't know what lying is, that's how that Faust character managed to swindle me so easily." He brooded about it for a moment. "Oh, well, I guess that honesty is the best policy after all." He snapped his talons again. "Just toss in that parchment and let's get going. I've a heavy date and she won't wait."

"Help yourself," said Cris, and threw the envelope containing the parchment into the pentagram. "It's been nice meeting you," he said politely. "Drop in again sometime."

"Thanks," grinned the demon. "I'll be seeing you." Then he vanished as Cris released the mental block retaining the force field. Cris had been right about the noise.

To a man who has conversed with a demon normal life seems rather tame. During the next three days Cris fretted at everyday routine, waiting impatiently for a tame chemist

to make up the hair restoring formula and spending his spare time going over the photostats of the parchment he had traded to his guest.

Having once broken the ice, as it were, Cris had no intention of calling a halt. Privately he considered that he had had the best of the bargain. He had swapped some mouldy old papers for a guaranteed hair restorer and, with modern mores and standards of masculine beauty what they were, he would be able to sell it for its weight in gold. If it worked, that is, and he had no doubt about that at all. The demon seemed to have been forced to operate under an ethical code which made lying impossible. The poor goon never had a chance.

Cris's first worry came when he discovered that the envelope containing the parchment which he had given to the demon was one bearing his name and address. The old texts were very firm on the fact that under no account should a demon be given such information. And, come to think about it, the demon had said that he was the only member of his race to be transported by the force field. It could have something to do with the fact that he was always summoned by name.

Cris worried about it for a day then dismissed it. In the light of modern science demon's were pretty poor adversaries. Still, it did seem odd that most demonologists had suffered pretty sticky ends, most seemed to have just vanished. He consoled himself by the reminder that most practitioners of the art were semi-crazy to begin with and no match for anything with the intelligence of a half-wit. Not like a modern man armed with modern science and able to think rings around the poseurs which most demons seemed to be.

In fact Cris was feeling quite satisfied with himself when, entering his apartment one day, he suddenly felt himself falling into a cloying darkness. He recovered to find himself stark naked, squatting on a stone floor in a room which seemed to have been transported from the days of the Inquisition.

"Hello, there," said a hatefully familiar voice. "I told you that I'd be seeing you."

"No!" Cris shook his head, feeling the bafflement of a man who has just had his world, literally, turned upside down. "No, it can't be."

The demon didn't answer, he didn't have to. He merely sat, lounging in his chair, the torchlight shining from his

scales, and let things speak for themselves. He was, Cris noticed, dressed in an elaborate costume of ornamented silks and from time to time he puffed carefully at a shapeless roll of vegetable matter.

"Bit of a shock, isn't it?" He reached beside him, selected a second roll of leaves, carefully lit it and threw it towards Cris. "Have a cigar."

"Thanks." Numbly Cris sucked at the weed and felt his lungs curl up within him.

"You'll get used to it," soothed the demon. "Well, I suppose that you can guess why you're here?"

Cris coughed and shook his head.

"No? You surprise me." The demon shrugged. "I thought that you would have guessed. It's usual, you know, to pay a return visit. Or didn't you know that?"

"No," said Cris sickly. "I didn't know."

"Of course, I have to be artful about it," continued the demon chattily. "I have to get their names, you know, sort of a reference for the ritual. If I can't get their names then I try to get hold of something very personal which carried something belonging to them. I thought I had you when you gave me that cigarette but the damn thing burned away. Usually the parchments are signed in blood or I got them to sign in blood, same thing in the end." He relaxed, seeming to be about twice as large as he had in the apartment. "All clear now?"

"What do you want with me?" said Cris, his courage seemed to have vanished with his clothes. Demonology, suddenly, appeared to have more to it than he had thought.

"Not much," said the demon. "Just the usual trade."

"Is that all?" Cris felt much better. "I can only give you information, you know, we discussed that before."

"Nothing wrong with information," said the demon. "Of course, I've really got the edge on you people. I live much longer and so can hold the force fields intact for quite a while. I'll feed you and all the rest of it, but I won't let you go until we've struck a mutually satisfying bargain." He bent down and lifted a box from the floor. It looked awfully familiar. It was, Cris realised, a fair copy of the external appearance of his portable radio.

"First I'll tell you what I want," continued the demon cheerfully. "I've made this as you can see. What I want

you to do is to show me how to shrink people so as to fit inside."

"Impossible!" Cris had to drag his tongue away from the roof of his mouth before he could speak. "I can't do that!"

"I don't want to be unreasonable," said the demon. "After all, you did tell me that you'd done it before. All I want is for you to tell me how to do it. We can operate here and, as soon as I've mastered the art, you can go home." He took another puff of his home-made cigar. He seemed perfectly satisfied with himself. Cris wasn't.

How could he explain a lie to a thing which didn't know what lying was? Or, for that matter, that he had been joking? The demon was a primitive, he probably believed in his version of magic and, unfortunately, he had the edge on Cris all along. He would simply keep him here until he did as ordered.

Cris knew now what had happened to the old demonologists.

—E. C. Tubb.

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THE CARP THAT ONCE . . .

By BRIAN W. ALDISS

This article comes to you through the discourtesy of the Bashenham East Water Board. Their creation of the Bashenham reservoir will always go down in history and my estimation as a classic piece of bungling. However, considering the scientific nature of the event, readers of *Science Fantasy* may be interested to hear some of the facts.

First, the background picture. Great Britain, as some of you may already know, is an island; an island, in this case, is a piece of land continually surrounded and inundated by water. Water plays a major part in Britain's economic life, being one of our few natural resources which does not have to be imported from abroad. Statistics reveal that every day, every man, woman and child in the country consumes from one to ten gallons of water (I forget the exact figure). This extravagant consumption began several centuries ago with the Saxons, worshippers of the god Thurst, whom we still remember in the name of the weekday, Thursday.

It was in cognisance of these facts that the Bashenham East Water Board (the BEWB) decided to create a large reservoir by flooding part of the Bashenham valley. As one not without

scientific pretensions (sic), I was invited along on the great day. The Bashenhams are two small townships which occupy one link of the Pennine chain ; Bashenham East is the larger, being five miles lower down the valley, and nearer the North Sea, than Bashenham West.

Within a few minutes of my arrival at the new reservoir, I was shaking hands with Chief BEWB Engineer Nadge Culler, stocky, 44-year-old ex-inebriate of Manchester's All-Water Technical Swimming Pool.

"People think we're a lot of Bewbs, but we'll show them," he boasted to me. "This reservoir will hold enough water to supply Bashenham East and West for twenty years."

"But isn't the reservoir going to cover the site of Bashenham West entirely?" I enquired.

"They asked for water, and they're going to get it," the 44-year-old Chief Engineer said. With a few eloquent waves of one of his dorsal vertebrae, he showed me how the dam had been constructed across the river Bash, while at the far end of the valley, one hundred cubic acres of arable farmland had been bulldozed between two hills, thus effectively jeopardising any hope the Bash ever had of winding safe to sea. For one dorsal vertebrae, it was, I had to admit, pretty eloquent.

I was taken over to the dam itself, where the mayors of East and West Bashenham were jostling each other for the most favourable place before the B.B.C. TV cameras. From here, we had a splendid view of the now rapidly filling valley. Snatching a pair of binoculars from the 44-year-old neck of Chief BEWB Engineer Culler, I peered down at the streets of the little township of Bashenham West. Already, the ground floor windows of the council houses were submerged ; the signboard of "The Bird and Baby," further down the street was awash ; the memorial to the Fallen of the First World War stood out of the flood like a lighthouse. The sight was inevitably one of melancholy.

"It's time for the launch now," Chief Engineer Culler said, retrieving his binoculars and looking at his watch.

"I had mine before I came, thanks," I said. "I'm not hungry."

"I said 'launch,'" Culler growled, in a 44-year-old voice, and even as he spoke, a trim little craft flying the BEWB pennant sped over the water, to moor efficiently beside us.

I followed Culler meekly into it ; we were going to inspect the final stages of the inundation close to.

Just as we were casting off, the mayor of Bashenham West called out pathetically to us, and we helped him aboard.

"It's just occurred to me !" he gasped, as we set out across the water for the disappearing town. "When we evacuated the Town Hall, we cleared everything out but the little aquarium in the waiting room. I must rescue those poor fish before it's too late."

"They'll be all right. They can escape and have all the reservoir to swim in," Culler said.

"These were tropical fish," the mayor said. "They'll get their death of cold in ordinary water. Faster, faster !"

As luck would have it, there were two underwater outfits, complete with aqualungs, in the launch. Before I knew what was happening, or could explain about my tendency to arthritic carbuncles in the presence of moisture, Culler was pressing the mayor and me into the clammy equipment.

Bravely, I tried to cover my nervousness with a joke.

"How funny you look in long, black feet, mayor," I said, when we were nearly ready.

"Funnier still when I have my flippers on," he snapped.

We churned down the High Street, where waves lapped angrily against Marks and Spencer's roof. As we passed the now submerged public library, two volumes floated by : a D. K. Broster novel and *The Athletic Abilities of Gymnosperms*. My melancholy returned ; this time, it had goose pimples.

The Town Hall, a tall building, was not yet completely under water. When we had tied up against one of its Gothic pinnacles, the mayor and I climbed over the side of the boat. It was like lowering oneself into an immense tureen full of yesterday's Brown Windsor. The mud in the water reduced visibility practically to nil. We clambered carefully down the facade, and went in at the main entrance. Once inside, the mayor closed the great doors, whereupon the waters grew clearer.

In our torch beams, fish loomed and leered. It was like something out of Omar Khayam :

They say the Sanitary Inspector used to creep

Where sticklebacks and tench now glory and drink deep.

As the mayor beckoned me on, I pretended I was an intrepid explorer, moving among the remains of some mighty,

long-lost civilization . . . but the mitty moment passed unmitigatedly when we arrived at the door of the waiting room. The mayor pushed it open, and in we went.

Moving in slow motion, we worked our way through the murky waters, across to the square aquarium, which was perched on a window sill. The fish had fled. We saw them now, hovering unhappily about the room, those glossy tiddlers called Red Cichlids ; they moved groggily sideways in square circles, like fat men traversing ice in search of infra red lamps. I saw the mayor make a gesture of despair. He was afraid we should never be able to recapture them.

It certainly was a difficult business. Using our hands, and then our flippers, we did manage to catch one or two of the little blighters, popping them back into the aquarium and using a chair seat to keep them in. I wished someone had been there to film that weird dance the mayor and I did ; it just needed a lick of interstellar music, and we should have rated an ' X ' Certificate.

When the mayor began to go into strange contortions, I diagnosed nitrogen bends, running over to him in panic—you know how badly nitrogen bends. However, he was merely divesting—or I should say dipanting—himself of a long pair of wollen underpants. With these, he managed to capture two more Cichlids, until the water was too muddied with his gyrations for us to see anything.

Then it was I had my bright idea. It worked so much like a charm, that within another fifteen minutes, we were climbing back into the launch, and handing up to Chief Engineer Culler an aquarium containing one large, complacent carp. Clutching it in a 44-year-old grasp. Culler gazed at it bemused, and asked, " But where are the tropical fish ? "

" Inside the carp," I said. " We let him into the waiting room because he caught the fish much more quickly and efficiently than we could. When he was gorged, he was easy to capture. Fortunately, he swallowed the fish whole, so they will be warm where they are until we can get them to some water of the correct temperature."

By this time the rising flood had swallowed Bashenham West ; a church steeple showed here, the D. K. Broster novel still showed there ; everything else had gone. My account would therefore have ended at this point, were it not for the

strange and dramatic sequel, of which you may have read in your newspapers.

I was driving home towards the coast next morning, along that hill road from which first Bashenham West and then, later, lower down the Bash valley, Bashenham East may be surveyed. To my surprise—my intense surprise—Bashenham West lay again exposed to the sky. Of the vast sheet of water which had covered it the night before, there was no sign, beyond some deep puddles by the cattle market and a generally washed look everywhere. It would not be wrong to say an eerie sensation stole over me ; then I recalled that, in these enlightened days, there was bound to be a scientific explanation for the seeming miracle. So without pausing (in fact, accelerating somewhat), I sped down the road which descends with the valley into Bashenham East.

As the speed restriction sign loomed, I braked sharply. The road ran into a lake. All before me lay a sheet of water, as suave and unruffled as a George Sanders villain. Beneath it lay the town of Bashenham East. I climbed from the car, my jaw hanging uncontrollably open.

As I looked at the enigmatic surface of the lake, a solitary swimmer came towards me. He dragged himself onto the road, wringing out his 44-year-old clothes. It was Chief Engineer Nadge Culler.

"Those fools in Bashenham West !" he said bitterly, drying his hair on my proffered overcoat. "All their sewage and drainage system runs down into ours, and they forgot to close the connecting sluice gates. As a result, all the reservoir water drained through to us in the night. Thanks to their carelessness, we're sunk."

I could see what he meant. There is another fact about water you might care to know : it always finds its own level.

—Brian W. Aldiss

OUT OF CONTROL

We present a rather curious and strange type of fantasy theme by Kenneth Bulmer in this issue—based sometime in the future when part of the population have acquired levitational powers. Such a gift, however, does not always make things ideal for those who walk—the pedos.

By **KENNETH BULMER**

Harry Warne was leviting through the tenth up-town lane, cursing his toothache and the state of business in general, when he was flagged by the couple who started all the trouble.

They were standing on the railed-in porch of the Roxy's twentieth storey exit, both well muffled-up against the late winter chill, which at this altitude was borne in cuttingly in the brisk breeze. The call was urgent; they wouldn't have the inclination to loiter along above the city, admiring the fairy-tale patterns and colours of lights.

Harry looked down. The Roxy was a sombre pile of aluminium and glass, sedately neon-signed, noted for good food and wine and high prices—and with a devilishly awkward approach lane. The man jiggled his arm and in Harry's mind the faint echo 'Taxi!' formed. He sighed and levited downwards.

Cold wind slapped his thin body. He shivered; but kept on down. He couldn't afford to miss this fare.

The man must have been sending out his taxi demands broadcast. Harry saw another levitaxi swoop in, the man's

arms outspread like an eagle's. "Show off!" Harry grumbled. Through the gathering dusk he could see his rival was a youngster, full of fire and go and probably too ready to take chances. Again Harry sighed. Once, he had been like that.

He consoled himself with the reflection that he'd probably negotiated the tricky run-in under the high-level Park way to the Roxy's twentieth storey porch more times than this youngster had levited across the river. He relaxed his ever-present and unthought-about concentration, and allowed himself to fall sheer for fifty feet. It was an old stunt. Right on the button, when the Parkway was safely past, he'd call again on that mysterious reservoir of power possessed by levits and haul up, to float in and land on the porch light as thistledown.

This time, just as he was about to pull up, a stabbing thrust of agony skewered his teeth. It felt as though all his lower jaw was being violently wrenched from side to side and a million pins were dancing upon the roots of his teeth. He winced, his mind cringed from the pain—and at once he was falling helplessly through the cold winter dusk towards the grey hard concrete waiting two hundred and fifty feet below.

He heard, vaguely, the woman scream. Then the rush of air past his ears blotted out all other sound in its own rushing bedlam.

He knew it was of no use to think about what was happening, or of what he should do. It had been so long since anything like this had happened that it came as a shock—piled on top of the other—that he found difficulty in finding that complete cessation of conscious direction of thought, that absolute loss of self, which was the only road by which a levit could attain mastery of his craft.

To think was to die. He had to let the mysterious power his brain possessed take over his body, control it, tell it what secret process to follow, teach it to fly.

And all the time the pavement below leaped nearer.

He grunted with the effort of doing nothing. He wanted—against all the dictates of reason—to cry out, to struggle, to do all the things that would inevitably lead to his own destruction.

Phantasms of past childish dreams of flying rose to torment him. Hell—he hadn't dreamed of flying since the day his parents discovered he was a levit and had at once apprenticed him to old Sam Wellerman the local levitaxi boss. Wind

keened past him. His coat flapped wildly. The duo harness strapped to his feet flogged upwards, torn loose by his violent plunge.

He thought of poor Bill Hinckman. Last month. A Sunday, a busy day. Bill had plunged three hundred feet. He'd made just a puddle of red on the pavement when they'd got to him. Of course, Bill had been getting old, losing his powers. He should have retired years back. But it came to them all in the end. As soon as the warning sign came, they ought to hand in their cards, retire to a farm where they could keep both feet firmly on the ground.

But, of course, they all went on working until one day it happened.

By God, though! It wouldn't happen to him!

A flare of nervous energy drilled through him. He felt the familiar stasis grow and grip, felt his body responding to the unknown power which lay in his mind. His awful plunge was checked. Gasping, the wind filling his mouth, his eyes running, his arms flapping ludicrously, he hauled up. He began to rise. He was shaking all over. He hadn't realised how near he had been to destruction.

He went up with savage, frightened force, driving himself to a pitch of controlled power he hadn't experienced since the days of his youth.

By the time he was back level with the porch he had himself in hand again. He landed lightly, unwinding the duo harness. The couple stared at him as though they were seeing a ghost.

"Are you all right?" the woman asked.

"Sure." Harry made it crisp. If he frightened the fare—he wouldn't have a fare. His teeth were down to their usual familiar ache now. The dancing needles were gone. "Sure. Just a quick way to get under the Parkway." He looked around.

There was no sign of his rival, the youngster who had gone boring in with wideflung arms. Then Harry saw him, clinging to a supporting strut in the gloom under the bridge. He smiled.

"You want to trust us experienced levitaxis," he said, extending the harness. "That young feller got caught in the cross-currents under the Parkway bridge. Got shook up. Needs to learn."

"Well—" the man said doubtfully.

"I thought you were in a hurry," Harry pointed out. He wanted to get away at once, launch himself again into thin air. His escape had been morale-sapping; it was a wonder that he was alive at all. He didn't want to stand about on a drafty porch two hundred and fifty feet up and gossip.

"Yes," the woman said, shivering. "Yes." She took her companion's arm. "Joe—we've got to get across to the apartment. Maxi will be waiting. You know what he's like if anyone upsets him."

The man was a florid-faced, well-fed, self-satisfied individual. Now, at mention of Maxi, he seemed to shrivel.

"All right. But make it snappy." He took the harness and clumsily adjusted it around the girl's shoulders. He was evidently trying to exert himself, show the world that he was still a tough guy. He took the credit for wanting to move on to himself. His hands, when they fastened the magneclamps, were not quite steady.

Harry had always made it a guiding precept of his business life to personally inspect the harness of every fare. He knew what happened to a levitaxi who dropped his fares. With the world still not yet split fifty-fifty between levits and pedos, the courts could be counted on to deal summarily and harshly with slackness of that kind. When everyone possessed the magic power of levitation—why then, Harry surmised with a wry little chuckle—levitaxis would no longer have a job.

Now, in obedience to his own conscience no less than the city ordinances, he bent forward and checked the harness. The florid-faced man didn't like that.

"What's your trouble, Pop? Think I'm fumble-fingered?"

"No, mister," Harry replied mildly. "You know the law."

"The law!" The man's contempt was genuine, Harry saw with surprise. "Catch any smart operator worrying about that."

The exchange of words had given Harry time to assure himself that the harness was secure about his passengers' shoulders. He did not bother to reply; he contented himself with rising until the man and woman left the porch floor, then he flung them all upwards at a high speed.

Only then did he remember that he had received no destination.

"Where to?" he called, looking down.

The florid man's face was a dark smear in the dusk, a stray neon highlighting the bulbous nose. Words came up to Harry, faint and wind-driven. "Saturn Circus."

Harry smiled. That was as good as saying: "Mind your own business." Saturn Circus was the centre of a radiating network of high-class apartment houses, where any individuality was lost in a complicated numbering system of address listing.

He flew on strongly, through the cold wind, passing unheeding over the flashing, winking, screaming and never-quiet lights below. He hit the fourth level across-town lane, and bumbled along comfortably with other levitaxis, their passengers swinging comfortably below in harnesses like his own. Everyone was warmly wrapped and cheerful headlights winked from the foreheads of levitaxis passing on the fourth level down-town below him. He saw very few private individuals bucking the laws by travelling in the commerce lanes. Citizens who could levitate had first use of the lower, warmer, lanes.

Saturn Circus threw a broad ring of fire into the evening sky. Myriads of flying figures darted into and out of that glow. Harry began to think of a quick snack and a drink as soon as he had deposited his passengers. He was feeling tired—the strain of levitating seemed to drag on him these days in an unbelievable, a frightening manner. There should be no physical feeling whatsoever in levitating; that was one of the basic precepts. Although no-one had as yet succeeded in identifying the source of power or had any real idea of what forces were involved, enough procedure had been established to allow comparatively free handling of that power by busy mankind. There was a strong parallel with the knowledge and use of electricity.

His teeth were still aching. He was quite used to that—he staunchly refused to have them out, saying simply enough, that they didn't ache more than one month out of twelve. This time, though, the ache was worse than he had before experienced. If he had them out, he had found some foggy rationalisation in the concept in his mind, it would, he thought, brand him for an old man. He knew it was nonsense with most people going in for expensive dentures in their thirties. But it was his idea. He swung lower in the mounting darkness, looking for a suitable let-down point.

It came this time so suddenly that he was gasping in a head-long fall before he realised what had struck.

There was a sour little thought in his head that this just wasn't his day. The woman, strangely, wasn't screaming. But the man was shouting and cursing; maddened by fear, he was attempting to claw up the harness. His mottled face was hideous. Air buffeted their clothing.

Harry tried to regain control. He put all his strength into that dour struggle for domination by mind over body. Almost immediately, through the mounting whine of the wind and the chaotic physical sensations of the fall, he knew that this time it was futile. This time he was going to fall and smash into pulp. And with him, his two non-levitating paying passengers.

That thought was uppermost in Harry's mind. That he was letting down the customers. That these two pedos, through his own failing, were also to be killed.

He was aware of a subtle alteration in his mind. Something that only a levit could sense. But apathy had him by the throat. He had lost. Knowing that, he made no effort to exert his power again. Tumbling, the three people fell out of the sky.

He felt an enormous wrench on the harness. Next, he realised he was hanging upside down, like a bat on a rafter. The man, dangling oddly near him, made a savage lunge at him, caught his coat in one fist. The other looped over and connected with Harry's face. He saw sparks.

"Stop it, Joe. We're all right."

Harry managed to put a warding arm before his face and looked up. The girl was hanging in air, supporting them both. She was not completely calm; her voice shook. But, there she was, supporting them above the dull roar of the city, swaying in the wind, staring down white-faced.

That sobered Harry. Here was a slip of a girl doing his job! He felt a flush of shame. Quite automatically, he had righted himself, and levited up onto her level. That left her boy-friend—Joe—hanging below at an angle. His angry shout floated up. Both the girl and Harry ignored it.

"You're a levit," Harry accused her.

"Well, what of it?" she snapped crossly. "Is there a law against that?"

"No. But you didn't need to flag me down."

She jerked her head impatiently. "But he did."

"You mean he didn't know?"

"That's right. And because of your stupidity he does now." Her voice trembled. "Oh—you make me sick!"

"I'm sorry, Miss," Harry said, humbly.

The man was clawing at the harness. The girl let herself flop down. Harry felt the jerk on the harness. She'd relaxed, cut off that magic sustaining power. Now, he alone supported them in the gulf.

"Put us down right away, clown, before anything else happens," Joe said nastily. He and the girl were having a wrangling quarrel by the time Harry landed on a second storey strip. He released the magnetoclamps and fastened them to his legs. Then he stood, watching them, feeling utterly miserable.

Joe turned and saw him. He said: "How much?"

Automatically, Harry checked his meter. Then he looked up.

"You don't have to pay," he said dully. "After all, I didn't bring you in alone, did I?"

"Too right you didn't. Well, if you think you don't deserve payment, I won't argue. If I wasn't in a hurry I'd turn you in."

Something stung Harry. "You can read my licence number, can't you? Tomorrow morning will be just as good."

He felt sorry he'd said it as soon as he shut his lips. What the hell! If he could get out of a mess like this without police trouble, so much for the good. But his big mouth and his pitiful pride had made him drop right in it, up to his neck. He started to takeoff, hoping that Joe hadn't had time to read the licence.

As he ascended, the girl rose alongside.

She looked quickly at his licence number, smiled at him, then dropped back. The last Harry saw of them before the darkness took their figures was a rapid gesticulation of hands and an angry hunching of shoulders. He smiled tiredly. He'd certainly messed up that little love idyll!

He decided to call it a day. The snack and the drink could be found in the refrigerator back home. And he was seriously worried—panic-stricken—by the accident. This meant he was washed-up as a levitaxi. Even if the girl didn't repeat his number, and even if Joe didn't report him—how could he

trust himself to take other people's lives in his hands again? He might take that terrible fit and plummet out of the sky like a shot bird any time. It wasn't worth the risk, not least for the stain his conscience, he knew, would never get over, if it happened that he wasn't killed.

But as to how he was going to earn a living—on that subject his mind was a painful blank.

The economic situation did not encourage non-workers. There was a government pittance—but he wasn't old enough for that yet. And the Union wouldn't want anything of a levitaxi member who had fallen down on his job. Fallen down. Ha!

He sailed moodily across the city and then, for the first time in years, ever since he was a child, he let down on a pavement and began to walk.

The exercise tired unaccustomed muscles. But the fear was on him. He found he didn't have the nerve, the courage, to take off, to sail freely into the sky. He looked up. He shivered. The sky looked black and alien, hungry, waiting for him to rise into its immensity, and then to spit him out contemptuously, like a pip from some cosmic orange.

By the time he had reached his rooms on the top floor of a fifty storey apartment block he didn't have the spiritual where-withal to levit to his private landing sill. He took the lift.

The smooth upward surging rush made him feel ill.

He went in and, suddenly unwilling to face food, threw himself on the unmade bed and shut his eyes. He lay there a long time. He must have slept. Daylight was streaming in the window when he awoke, cold and stiff and hungry. He lay there for a time, conscious of his discomfort and almost masochistically relishing it as some vague punishment for his own failure. He thought of the old days when levits were forced to sell their precious powers in order to live—and he wondered if it was any better these days.

Only then did he swing his legs off the bed and sit up, running a tired hand through his thinning hair.

She must have been sitting there for some time. Quiet, like a mouse, with bright dark eyes fixed upon him.

He accepted it. Something told him never to be alarmed at whatever this quiet faced elfin girl might do.

"Well," he said at last. "What do you want?"

"To talk."

"Go on. I'm not stopping you."

"You're not surprised that I'm here?"

"Yes and no. You going to report me?"

She smiled. It warmed Harry, that smile. "No. At least, I don't think I need to."

A monstrous suspicion began to form in Harry's mind. He stared at her, running his tongue over his dry lips, feeling all his age and the chill drabness of early morning.

"You—don't need to? Does that mean what I think it means, miss?"

"You may call me Penelope. And if you imagine that I am a police officer, levit branch, well, then, you imagine quite correctly."

Harry stood up, dragging the bed clothes with him.

"A copper! A ruddy female levitcop!"

Penelope's eyes flashed angrily. "Yes! And you nearly got me killed last night. Oh—I don't mean falling. That wasn't your fault. But when you felt the power come back you should have levited up. What happened? Scared?"

Harry sank back on the bed. "Scared? Of course I was." He shook his head. "What do you mean—it wasn't my fault?"

She sighed patiently. "Haven't you ever had a levit decomposer turned on you before?"

"One of those filthy dang-busted inventions from hell! No I haven't—was that what it was?" he added, profoundly shocked and with a feeling of itchy dirt on him.

"That's what it was. It knocks a levit clear out of the sky."

"You don't have to tell me—now. I've heard of them, but not—anyway, what so-and-so would use one on a poor old cabby doing his job?"

"That's how I nearly got killed." She was, all at once, almost comically, deadly serious. "Now listen, Mr. Warne—"

"Call me Harry."

"Harry, what I'm telling you is confidential. Police business. I'm only telling you what you need to know so you can help me."

"What do you mean, help you? Be a copper's nark?"

"That's unnecessary. You tell me a taximan who, since time immemorial, hasn't been able to recite a list of his fares, what they looked like and their destinations to any politely enquiring policeman, and I'll show you a paragon and a misfit."

"'Sright. Go on, Penelope." The name sounded good in his mouth.

"Well—that man I was with last night, Joe, is suspected of being a triggerman in an illegal organisation. It needn't concern you what that organisation exists to do. It could be drugs, liquor, guns, women, sensitapes—anything. All I had to do was check on his contact—this fellow he calls Maxi. If I found Maxi—and thereby helped to round up the gang—my duty would have been done and I'd be well on the way to a little promotion I have in mind."

Harry began to see light through the darkness of this early morning call. He sniffed. "And someone turned a levit decomposer on you; they'd know I'd fall, and they wanted to check your reaction." He frowned. "They wouldn't know I would be so scared that I wouldn't come out of it. How could they?"

Penelope gave Harry a look tinged with compassion and pity, and filled in with baffled amusement. "They'd been keeping watch on me, I can tell that now. They must have seen your previous fall at the Roxy. They judged you correctly."

"Nice people." Harry felt his hunger. It was there, inside him; but he had never felt less like eating. He said, hesitantly: "So you want me to help you. Aside from the question of whether or not I can—I have my living to earn. I owe rent. I owe money all over. I'm at my last tether." He smiled crookedly. "From what I know of the police, you won't be paying for any favours I do you."

"I—I don't know—" That side of the question had come as a shock to her. She was clearly at a loss.

"Anyway," went on Harry. "Just because you are a levit doesn't make you a copper in their eyes, surely?"

"You probably don't know the criminal mind—"

"Ha."

"Well," she said, defensively and bristling. "You haven't made it a profession. They know, all right."

"So they know. How do I help you and stay alive?"

"So you will help me?"

"I haven't said so yet," he said cautiously. What business was it of his? And then Harry knew that he'd help this girl all right. She was of an age to be his daughter, if his marriage

had panned out. It hadn't—and here he was, a broken down old levitaxi, on his levitational uppers, sweating on the rent and debts.

She began to talk, quickly, coolly, opening up a new vista to Harry of just what could go on in a city when he thought he was well aware of the seamy side of life. He was forced to concede that she knew what she was talking about. And her plan hung together. Whether he would or not was something he didn't like to think on.

"So," she finished. "You meet me tonight outside the same place. Roxy's. And this time rub something on your teeth." She flashed him a smile. "You're a doddering old nincompoop to neglect them. They must be poisoning your innards worse than the rotgut they sell in Roxy's."

"I thought that was a swank place?"

"It was. Before Maxi—but don't worry about that. The less you know, the better for your health."

Only after she had gone, trailing a faint but exquisite perfume, did Harry come to think that she had given him no proof of the identity she claimed. He could be about to be set up as a fall guy in a double-crossing operation of the largest kind. The guy who took the can back, and got his pants decomposed off him, to fall sheer three hundred feet onto unyielding concrete like Bill Hinckman.

He looked at the little screw of notes she had tossed on the bed, sighed, picked them up and went out to get breakfast.

He had a bad day. Fares were scarce. Twice he was beaten to a call by a younger, more agile levitaxi. The little broadcaster most people carried which sent out a pulse 'Taxi!' for a hundred yard radius was amply powerful enough to attract the attention of at least two levitaxis. Tired, cold and dispirited, Harry flitted down towards the porch of the Roxy. He had almost made up his mind to refuse help. If pressed, he couldn't have explained why he was keeping the appointment.

She wasn't there. That fact penetrated at last, and Harry rose into the air, to hover undecided under the shadows of the Parkway bridge. The money she had left could be regarded as taxi payment, with a little over for compensation for his trouble. He was free. Technically, he didn't owe her anything; he could leave and forget the entire incident.

Hanging there under the bridge, drawing his coat around him against the chill, Harry saw the florid faced man Joe pass quickly out onto the porch and broadcast for a levitaxi.

The decision he had to make weakened Harry. He had to make up his mind, one way or the other. His character was on trial ; his guts, his personality as a man, all he had once believed in. He smiled cynically—hell—he had no illusions left now. He'd seen too much. Trouble was none of his business. Any sensible man would ignore the call, and high tail it out of there.

Harry dropped down to the porch. He hovered above Joe, checked the harness, said in a muffled voice : " Where to, guv ? "

" Saturn Circus. And make it snappy."

Harry took off, swung high over the city, heading in the darkness for the ring of lights around Saturn Circus.

Now that he had committed himself, he decided to let events take care of themselves. He had the feeling that he was a pawn in some game of vast stakes and terrifying power. The penalty for failure, he guessed, would be unpleasant.

Joe had not recognised him. He'd taken care to ensure that. As soon as they reached Saturn Circus, Joe paid him off, and then set off at a brisk walk into one of the radiating arms between the tall buildings. Rising into the darkened sky and switching off his headlamp, Harry followed. Penelope had said she would meet him at Roxy's. She hadn't been there ; but Joe had. The inferences were obvious.

His teeth were aching again ; a dull ache that was a part of being. He guessed another stabbing attack was due, when millions of needles would dance on his teeth roots and his jaw would vibrate in agony. Until it came he must go on with his own crazy scheme.

For a levit to follow a pedo without the latter's awareness is not too difficult a task. Harry, moving with a suitable caution, traced Joe through the canyons of the city within a city, marked the doorway he entered and then paused, hanging motionless in the sky. Now what ?

There was still time to back out. Something drove him on. He dropped to door level, entered the building quickly yet cautiously, suddenly aware that a false step could bring something more than a mere blow on the head. The ascending lift light was gliding up in the indicator, passing the fifties,

crossing the sixties. It stopped at seventy-two. Harry went back outside and levited up the frowning wall of the building until he had counted seventy-two rows of windows fall below.

He spent a cold and miserable half hour peering in window after window, mentally checking off those he was unable to see through because of curtains, until he came to the right apartment. He looked in apprehensively.

Joe he recognised right away. That meant that the dessicated, tall, sombre man with shock hair and nervous gestures must be Maxi. Penelope was sitting roped to an armchair. The two men were arguing violently. By pressing hard against the window with one ear and keeping his face down as far as he could, Harry could hear what was being said. If they spotted him, he could always levit off. He didn't stop to consider whether he should levit at once for the police.

From the way the men were talking, and the gun in Maxi's fist, what was going to happen was going to happen fast.

Maxi was saying: "So we know she's a cop. But we can't kill her here. We'll have to get away—"

"Do it right away, Maxi," Joe said harshly. "She's a damned levit. She could make a break for it any time she liked if we took her outside."

"Don't be silly. I've got a gun."

"What's the good of a gun if you're fifty feet up in the air? And that's where you'd be the minute you stepped outside with her."

That cheered Harry a little. Stalemate. They were divided among themselves—but it meant that Penelope had to be got out of that room right away. Maxi had logic on his side—but so did Joe.

Harry stared at the gun in Maxi's fist. He guessed that another reposed under the smartly cut coat worn by Joe. Harry didn't like guns. They made too much noise. Also they tended to go off at inconvenient times. And Harry, even though he was only a poor old broken-down levitaxi, had always been a peaceful man. What he now had to do was distasteful to him.

Just being a levit meant you were part of a vague and nebulous yet clearly defined and never-forgotten grouping of people. The whole great city around him, swathed in its garments of light against the cold night chill was only a thing

—people were important, and those people who could levit were more important to another levit than those who couldn't—even though they were all people. The ideas he had grown up with, the facts of existence which he had lived with all his life jumbled now in Harry's mind as he strove to sort them into a guiding principle for his next actions. He was a mug, a softie, a gone old granpop simpering after a pretty girl's face and figure—but he was also a levit. And that was the important thing.

Harry drew back in mid-air, hunched his shoulders and then, consciously relaxing everything, by negation drawing with full force upon that secret spring of power within all levits, he flung his body forward, crashed smotheringly through the window. Glass shattered awesomely. He was in the room, a window frame draped around his neck, blindly careering forward.

He smashed into Joe. One gnarled fist looped out and caught Joe on the face. It wasn't a clean blow. Joe's nose squashed. He screamed. Then, from his superior position high in the room, Harry kicked him. Joe went over and lay still. Blood stained the carpet.

A gun went off with stunning noise. Where the bullet had gone, Harry didn't know. He thought—although he wasn't sure—that it had missed him. When the glow of leviting possessed a man to the exclusion of all else, even the shocking impact of a bullet could for a time be disregarded. But of course it would still kill you.

In the wild hurly-burly, Maxi's aim had been wild. He was cursing, dancing around, trying to get in a good shot. Penelope was shouting—reasoned, planned shouting, not screaming. Harry swung on an arm in the centre of the room, desperately trying to dodge the aim from that squat gun, trying to swoop in at Maxi with that eagle-like plummet levits commanded when young. He circled and pirouetted, dived and climbed, his body a blur of speed. He performed an impeccable Immelman and kicked out the light. Now the odds were even. A pedo with a gun against an unarmed levit in a darkened room.

An interesting academic situation. One to set the tongues wagging over a leisurely glass after dinner, smoking a good cigar and phrasing brilliant remarks carefully. To Harry—no less than to Maxi—it was a matter of life or death.

He could hear Maxi's grunted breathing. He guessed that Maxi could hear the whispering rustle of his clothes as he soared through the air. Twice the gun exploded ; its tongue of vivid orange flame blinding in the room. Twice Harry charged in on the echo of the gun's thunder, and twice he missed Maxi. His throat was raw, and his old heart thumped like a faulty piston in a warped cylinder.

How many more shots had Maxi left ? Harry didn't know; but he had to gamble on a figure. He selected ten as a reasonable magazine-pistol load. That meant that Maxi had seven left. Seven lives, locked in metal, waiting to spurt and kill. The gun went off again, the bullet thudding into the ceiling. Six.

The darkness was not complete ; ruby lights glinted from polished surfaces and corners, reflected from the city illumination outside the window. Furniture became distorted, shadows threw treacherous pools, the corners of the room were deathtraps. Maxi was trying to keep silent. His hoarse breathing wheezed down the scale like an expiring steam engine. Penelope kept on shouting. Her voice sounded ragged and raw.

"Shut up that whining !" Maxi shouted, driven beyond control. He, too, understood Penelope's purpose.

At the top of her voice, mingled with her shouts, Penelope yelled : "You're for it this time, Maxi ! Now you know what it's like to be hunted. Get him, Harry ! Up the levits ! Up the levits !"

Harry was hanging a yard from the curtains. What light there was slanted into the room away from him, showing objects vaguely. He could see Penelope only by the dim bulk of the chair and the white loops of rope. Another shadow stirred beside her. Maxi. The shock-headed man towered over the girl, his arm upraised.

Harry went down in a long soundless glide. His bunched fists went together into the small of Maxi's back.

The mobster gave a hooting gasp and catapulted over the chair, his dark shape vanishing under the table. The gun went off as he disappeared. Five.

"Hold on, Penelope," Harry said. He had no knife with him. Joe would probably have one. Harry sailed over to the unconscious gangster, dropped down and began to go through his pockets.

The first two shots missed him. The third hit Joe.

By that time Harry had sprung into the air, reversed, swooped down and up, zig-zagged ; in general, given way to the terrible fear that had coursed through him as the shots passed so closely. Dazedly, he said : " Two."

Then, again, louder. " Two."

The time had come to make the final throw. He mastered his fear ; remembering that he was after all only an old levitaxi and quite unused to these scenes of violence. Maxi showed for an instant against the window, like a lean evil wolf. Then he had gone, heading towards Penelope. Harry dived down.

The ensuing few moments of action left him breathless, disarranged, frightened and bruised. He swept in towards Maxi, shouting, his arms wide. He did not see the gun but he knew—as levits did know—that it was pointed towards Penelope. Maxi meant to dispose of her now, for sure.

Harry's rush carried him down on the two people below. As the gun fired, he shot before Penelope. Something struck him painfully—and yet, strangely, without real agony—on the arm. He lost the use of that arm. He went on, carried by his own momentum and the urge of his fear, and then soared gracefully towards the ceiling.

He heard Penelope scream. She screamed now, genuinely, for the first time. " Harry ! Watch out—"

Harry was silhouetted against the window. He was hanging for that instant as though crucified against the light. He was paralysed with indecision.

The stabbing bolt of sheer agony, pure and undiluted, that struck downwards from his teeth drove every thought and desire from his mind. Mindless, he felt the carpet strike his heels. His whole face, his head, his entire body, seemed wrapped in flames.

He sprawled forward on his nose. His one good arm flailed the carpet. His hand caught something, something hard wrapped in softness, as he wallowed forward. Somewhere an idiot voice was shouting : " One ! and None ! None ! None !"

Through the hell of that moment, he heard his own voice, and understood.

He surged up, fighting to stand on his own feet without the use of that mysterious levit power. He stood, humpily, awkwardly, and then he thrust off.

Maxi, who had jumped forward, firing as Harry fell, his leg caught in Harry's drowning clutch, went on travelling, rapidly. He went clean over Harry's head as Harry turned on his levit power. Maxi went clean on—straight through the gaping window.

When Harry had cut the girl free with Joe's knife, and she was shakily calling the police, he tried to re-enact that last bizarre scene.

"He shot at me, an open unmissable target, just as my teeth played me up," Harry said, with a tired little smile. "The same thing happened as happened when you called me yesterday. I lost control. And in falling, Maxi missed me." He sighed.

Penelope said: "And he was just a pedo. When he went through that window, he went down seventy-two storeys."

"A long fall," Harry said. "A long fall."

The police were at the outer door when Penelope said: "I don't know about your teeth now, Harry. They—"

"They've served their turn. A levit is more than a normal human, we all know that." He smiled. "I'll make an appointment to have them seen to tomorrow. I don't suppose I'll need their help again."

"You're still a good levit, Harry. I don't think you will."

"I'm just an ordinary old levitaxi man," Harry said, opening the door.

—Kenneth Bulmer

April 11

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